

Ash Wednesday 2020

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven."

Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus criticizing the Pharisees because their *outward* expressions of piety do not reflect their inner hearts; and we see the *Pharisees* criticizing **Jesus** and his disciples for NOT observing these outward expressions of piety. We know, for instance, how often Jesus is criticized for healing on the Sabbath, and his disciples are criticized for such things as picking grain on the Sabbath. (Matt. 12:1) At one point, the Pharisees ask Jesus, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat." (Matt. 15:2) To which Jesus responds, "You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me... out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. **These** are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.'" *Matthew 15:7-20*

Now, it is easy for us to **ignore** some of these teachings of Jesus about outward expressions of piety because *we* don't have the same kind of strict religious laws that the Jews in Jesus' day had. Oh, we wash our hands before eating – but in order to wash off germs, *not* as a **religious** practice. And while some Christians like the Seventh Day Adventists still observe the practice of not working on the

Sabbath (which for them is still Saturday), *most* Christians today **don't** think that working on the Sabbath makes you a bad Christian.

But this doesn't mean that there aren't ways *we* express **our** Christian piety outwardly in America today – and sometimes we make a big deal of it! For the past few decades, politicians running for office cannot get the evangelical vote unless they are **seen** outwardly praying with prominent evangelical leaders. Yet this seems to have little correlation with whether their *policies*, once they are in office, will reflect the compassion and concern for others which Jesus teaches. Fights have been fought in the not-too-distant past about displaying the 10 Commandments or a nativity scene on public property, or praying in public schools; and yet these same avowedly “good Christians” involved in these fights often turn a blind eye to Jesus' clear and unambiguous commandments about caring for the poor, the stranger, the foreigner, the hungry, those in prison, and the outcast.

More recently, some Christians have made a big deal about saying “Merry Christmas!” instead of “Happy Holidays!” There have even been boycotts of certain large retail chains by self-righteous Christians because the executives of those retail chains had instructed their employees to greet customers with “Happy Holidays!” And some self-righteous Christians have gotten all up in arms about the kind of decorations Starbucks puts on their coffee cups at Christmas time. But again, some of these **same** self-righteous “Christians” turn a blind eye to caring for the poor, the stranger, the refugee, and the outcast – which was Jesus' **actual** teaching and example. *Nowhere* in the Gospels does Jesus command, “Thou shalt say ‘Merry Christmas’” or “Thou shalt construct the 10 Commandments and nativity scenes on courthouse lawns” or “Thou shalt engrave ‘In God We Trust’ on thy currency” – all of which are **modern**-day equivalents of the ritual washing of hands in Jesus' time. And those who lobby hard for the “right” to pray aloud in public schools should take heed of Jesus' instruction in today's Gospel to pray, **not** publicly, but *in secret*. Jesus clearly states, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ [or ‘Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas’] will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who **does** the will of my Father in heaven.” *Matthew 7:21*

Now, many of us express our faith outwardly in some way. Some of us wear crosses around our necks (or on our rings, as I do), or put crosses or fish symbols on our vehicles. Sports players point to heaven after a touchdown or home run or goal. Baseball players cross themselves before entering the batter's box. Today, **we** have our foreheads marked with ashes. Now, I have no problem with these outward expressions of faith in and of themselves; nor do I think Jesus would. But the key lies in the *heart*, which ancient people thought was the seat of our **intentions**. What Jesus says in today's Gospel is, “Beware of practicing your piety before others *in order to be seen by them*.” If we make a big deal of saying “Merry Christmas,” what is the *intention* of our heart in doing so? If we decide to wear the ashes on our forehead all day rather than wash them off, what is our

intention in doing so? To be seen by others as pious? To prove to our own selves that we are good Christians? Or to be witnesses of the good news of Jesus to others?

Now, we are *indeed* called to be witnesses, to be sure; and perhaps wearing our ashen crosses **will** cause someone to take notice in a *good* way, and think about Jesus' life, his teachings, his death and resurrection. But on the other hand, perhaps, in our modern climate of skepticism toward Christianity, wearing an ashen cross on our forehead all day will be seen by others as an outward display of hypocritical, "in-your-face" Christianity. Who knows how people might respond to the cross on our forehead? I *do* think that a far **stronger** witness is, as Jesus says, to "**do** the will of my Father in heaven." Caring for the poor, the outcast, the refugee, the imprisoned, the hungry, the homeless... *this* is the witness that both Joel in our Old Testament ("rend your hearts and not your clothing"), and Jesus in our Gospel, say **really** counts.

Former Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning, in a book he co-authored with his father Archie, wrote: "Some [football] players get more vocal about [their faith]—the Reggie Whites, for example—and some point to Heaven after scoring a touchdown and praise God after games. I have no problem with that. But I don't do it, and I don't think it makes me any less a Christian. I just want my *actions* to speak louder..." (*Manning*, by Archie and Peyton Manning)

Father Thomas Keating, in speaking about the practice of Centering Prayer, says that Centering Prayer is not so much about *attention* as *intention*. And I think *that* is the distinction that Jesus is drawing in today's Gospel. He does not criticize outward expressions of piety *per se*; just outward expressions of piety *done in order to be seen by others*.

And so, as we enter Lent today, *whatever* discipline you choose to follow these 40 days of Lent – spending more time in prayer, attending Saturday's retreat or our Friday evening programs, volunteering for – and giving money to – Mercy Today, fasting, visiting or sending cards to the sick or homebound, or *whatever* discipline you choose – ask yourself, "What is my **intention** in following this discipline? Is it to make myself feel or appear more pious? to prove to myself or others that I'm a good Christian? Or is it to be open and vulnerable in the deepest part of myself to being transformed by Christ, and allowing God's compassionate Spirit to flow through me in service to others?"

What is the *intention* of my heart this Lent? If we would ask ourselves that question, in light of today's Scripture readings, and commit to some discipline with the intention of being transformed more and more into the image and likeness of Christ, I think would be well on our way to making a good start toward a Holy and transformative Lent.

AMEN