

## Ash Wednesday 2022 Sermon

### *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..."*  
Jesus cautions us.

Throughout the Gospels, we see the Pharisees criticizing Jesus and his disciples for not observing certain outward expressions of piety. We know, for instance, how often, in the Gospels, Jesus is criticized for healing on the Sabbath, and his disciples are criticized for such things as picking grain to eat on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1) or not ritually washing their hands. Conversely, *Jesus* criticizes the Pharisees because their *outward* expressions of piety do not reflect their *inner* hearts. At one point, the Pharisees ask Jesus, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not [ritually] wash their hands when they eat." (Matt. 15:2) And 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 [ritually] unwashed hands does not defile." *Matthew 15:7-20*

Now, my friends, I think it can be easy for us to gloss over these Gospel accounts wherein Jesus argues with the Pharisees about outwardly observing certain Jewish religious laws; since, to us, these laws can seem non-sensical. What's wrong

with eating pork, after all? What's wrong with ordering my steak medium rare at a restaurant? And yet, the Jewish dietary laws prohibit both of these. And, while *some* Christians like the Seventh Day Adventists still observe the practice of not working on the Sabbath, *most* Christians today **don't** think that working on the Sabbath makes you a bad Christian. And what could *possibly* be wrong with **healing** on the Sabbath? These laws that Jesus and the Pharisees argue about seem pointless or silly to many of us modern Christians; and therefore, it is easy for us to *miss* Jesus' teaching in today's Gospel about the pitfalls of how **we** can outwardly practice our religion for the wrong reasons: either to gain the approval (or the votes!) of others, or as a way of proving to **ourselves** that we are righteous or "good Christians." Here in the United States, politicians running for office cannot get the Evangelical vote unless they are **seen** outwardly praying with prominent Evangelical leaders, or in some other way publicly displaying their piety. Yet these outward displays of piety often have little correlation with whether their *policies*, once they are in office, reflect the compassion, forgiveness, and concern for others which Jesus teaches. In Russia, Vladimir Putin makes sure he is pictured greeting the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow; and yet the teachings of Jesus about loving one's enemy and St. Paul's exhortation that we live at peace with everyone seem to be the furthest things from Mr. Putin's mind.

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 some Christians because the executives of those retail chains instructed their employees to greet customers with "Happy Holidays!" And some Christians have gotten up in arms about the kind of decorations Starbucks puts on their coffee cups at Christmas time. And yet, some of these **same** Christians turn a blind eye to caring for the poor, the stranger, the refugee, and the outcast – which is what Jesus actually taught and exemplified. *Nowhere* in the Gospels does Jesus command, "Thou shalt say 'Merry Christmas'" or "Thou shalt engrave 'In God We Trust' on thy currency" – which are **modern**-day equivalents of the ritual washing of hands or healing on the Sabbath in Jesus' time. 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 – by wearing a cross around our neck or putting bumper stickers on our cars with a symbol such as a cross or a fish. 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 don't think there's a problem with these outward expressions of faith in and of themselves. But the key lies in our heart, in our **intentions**. What Jesus says in today's Gospel is, "Beware of practicing your piety before others *in order to be seen by them.*" He cautions us to examine our intentions. If we make a big deal of saying "Merry Christmas," what is our *intention* in doing so? Is it simply to prove to ourselves and others

that we are good Christians? If we decide to wear the ashes on our forehead all day rather than wash them off, what is our *intention* in doing so? Is it to be seen by others as pious? To prove to our own selves that we are faithful Christians? Or is it to be humbled, and reminded of our own mortality each time we look in the mirror? Pondering one's mortality is a recommended spiritual practice in practically every major religion. In Christianity, it is particularly encouraged during Lent: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

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 *that* is the point, I believe, that Jesus is making 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*, to prove to others (or to our own selves!) how righteous we are.

As we enter Lent today, *whatever* discipline you might choose to follow these 40 days of Lent – spending more time in prayer, reading a daily devotional, attending Saturday's retreat or our Friday evening programs, volunteering for – or giving money to – Meals on Wheels or Loaves and Fishes, fasting, visiting or sending cards to the sick or homebound - *whatever* discipline you might 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 to assuage my guilt? Or is it to be open and vulnerable in the deepest part of myself to the Presence of God and God's action in my life, and to seek to be transformed, more and more, into the likeness of Christ?"

Attorney, Professor, and Spiritual Director Greg Richardson writes, "Lent is about getting a clear idea of what we are holding onto which holds us back... [It] is the liturgical season for ... letting go [of] what holds us..."<sup>1</sup> Letting go of what holds us; of what we are holding onto that holds us back.

What holds you back from experiencing the Presence of God in your life, and from letting the Holy Spirit breathe God's Love and Life through you? What obstacles and defenses keep you from becoming who you *truly* are in God – your True Self?

Perhaps you can ask yourself those questions this Lent and, after identifying what it is that holds you back, make it your intention to begin taking the steps necessary for you to let it go. To let it go.

AMEN

1 from the blog, “Strategic Monk,”

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/strategicmonk/2022/03/03/practices-from-the-inside-out-practicing-lent-as-contemplatives/>