



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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ASH WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6, 2019, 7PM SERVICE
ISAIAH 58:1-12; PSALM 103:8-14; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:20-6:10; MATTHEW 6:1-6,16-21

RETHINKING THE MORAL MATH OF LENT

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."]*

In the preface of the first Book of Common Prayer from 1549, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer wrote: "there was never any thing by the wit of man [sic] so well devised, or so sure established, which in continuance of

time hath not been corrupted." That is to say, sooner or later even the best of human affairs, left to our own devices, will be misappropriated and used for ill. History is strewn with examples of such corruption.

Cranmer was admonishing well-intended but misguided people of faith who had distorted the religious practices of their day...which is to say, we even manage to mess up the holy things that are intended to help us rediscover the truth of who God is and how we relate to God.

A similar admonition is at the heart of Jesus' cautionary words in the gospel today: prayer, fasting and almsgiving are designed to aid us in our spiritual journeys, and especially in the observance of a holy Lent, but how often they take on a life of their own. They are intended to be the means and method to experiencing a closer relationship with God and a deeper understanding of self, but they risk becoming diversions that hinder, rather than help us on the journey, when they become the focus altogether. As I say in one way or another every year about this time, if giving up chocolate only leads me to think more about chocolate, then I have missed the point of the self-denial.

There's another false bottom trap that can ensnare well-intentioned practitioners of the Lenten disciplines: when we convince ourselves that we must do these things to earn

God's grace. It is an insidious trick our false selves play on us, that God measures our worthiness by the yardstick of our moral rectitude. That sets us on the slippery slope which Jesus points out in the gospel: when we need others to see our piety, it becomes evidence that declares our worthiness to others as proxy for the god we've created to keep count of our good deeds. Scorekeeping is a treacherous way we hedge our bets against a God who simply yearns for the relationship with us all.¹

When religion is reduced to a set of moral directives—thou shalt do this; thou shalt not do that...it flattens out into a veneer of “being good for goodness sake.” That's not bad; it's just not going to deliver one into the crucible of divine presence very often. The German philosopher Hegel once cynically wrote that such religion is not much more than crowd control—getting people to do good things as a way of keeping them in check.

This tradition of Ash Wednesday refuses to swim in the shallows of such religious reductionism. It is, by definition, a day of contextual richness, part of a contoured journey through the deeper valleys of life,

¹ Some thematic elements drawn from an essay by Tricia Gates Brown, <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/ccblogs-network/sin-about-not-knowing-who-we-are>

where the shadows of death lurk, and the ashen reminder of our sin penetrates to the core of our being, and a loving God creates space for us to return once more to our true identity.

We talk openly of sin today, for a reason, but to plumb these deeper fields, we must wrestle with what we mean when we talk of sin. The truth is we don't like talking about sin, mostly because we misunderstand it much of the time. Sin is not defined by the spreadsheet of moral peccadillos committed across one's life, listed out as a taxonomy of failure, with sexual sins carrying the largest value, and the bigger the sum total, the further you are away from any chance of earning God's good graces. That's just the alter-ego of the moral scorekeeping I mentioned before. It's an algebra that only adds up for a god who's interested in keeping score to exclude. I don't think that's the God who we proclaim today.

The deeper meaning of "sin" has to do with not knowing who we truly are. It has to do with not knowing who God is and how God wants us to be right within ourselves.

Yes, the moral peccadillos—the instances of missing the mark—they can help us when we come to see them as symptoms of the disease. The analogy is when physical symptoms alert

us to the presence of clinical disease—a cough and fever might mean we have pneumonia, but if all we ever do is focus on the cough and fever, we will never deal with the real problem, which is pneumonia.

If we reduce sin to the list of moral failures, but never look deeper to understand how they are merely symptomatic of the underlying dis-ease of disconnection from self and from God, then we will never discover the truth of life—that God is in union with us and all creation, as the ground of all being, even as we remain unconscious of that beautiful truth. No score of good works can make that indelible reality more true than it already is—that we and all creation are suffused with the character of God, here and now, always have been, always will be. Likewise, no score of bad works can remove that mark.

So, on the one hand, the Lenten disciplines of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, or whatever form they take for you, are designed, not to earn God's good graces, but simply to let the dross of life fall away and awaken us to our true selves, and in doing so, recognize and lean into the eternal embrace of an all-loving God.

And on the other hand, we miss the point when we reduce sin to moral misdemeanors. The Greek word for “sin” is hamartia—literally, “missing the mark,” but we misappropriate sin, we miss the mark of sin, when we ascribe it misdirected power. Rather than running a deficit in the math of moral acts, missing the mark is actually the way we understand that we thought we were X, but really, we are Y. And coming to recognize that you are actually Y is the point of all this.

Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return—it is an invitation to go deeper, as you plumb the depths of life and death, in the context of the love of God which gathers it all up, such that nothing is lost, nothing in all

creation is lost. Not even the dusty residue of our broken lives.

Cranmer picked up on a line from Psalm 51 when he wrote the opening collect for this service in which we make our common petition: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, O God...

The heart made new is alert to the lifeblood of existence, which is that God is not disconnected from us. The heart made contrite is one that opens to discover that connection coursing through our veins, invigorating every fiber of our beings. The invitation of Ash Wednesday is there—deep down, awaiting rediscovery once more by you and me.



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