

Do Not Look Dismal
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
March 5, 2014

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

¹ ‘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.

² ‘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. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵ ‘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. ⁶But 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.

¹⁶ ‘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. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so 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.

¹⁹ ‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

A modern translation. If you give up chocolate, Jesus says, “Don’t go to Twitter and post ‘Just saw my first Cadbury commercial – torture. #sohungry #nochocolate #Lent2014 #maybeIlllosesomeweight #Sundaysdontcount.’” If you give up red meat, Jesus says, “Don’t post a photo of your dinner plate on Instagram with the caption: ‘What’s missing from this plate? - I miss red meat already.’” If you commit to daily walking and praying, Jesus says, “Don’t post on Facebook: ‘Okay, so I am going to pray and walk every day during Lent. [Tim Sandy Nancy Mary Ann Steve Bill and Pat](#), if you don’t see me walk past your house each day, call me on it.” And if you give up dessert, Jesus says, “Don’t create a Pinterest board called ‘Once Lent is over’ and add pictures of decadent desserts linked to their recipes.”

If it was difficult for the people of Jesus’ day to keep it to themselves that they were doing good things, how much harder is it for us when we are all about social media, sharing the minutiae of our lives and waiting for people to re-tweet, share, like, and re-pin everything we put out there. It may seem ironic then that, on this day when we leave here with visible ashes on our foreheads, we read how we are not supposed to make a show of our faith. Or at least that’s what this reading might seem to be about. For certain, there is a caution about what others might call showing off. The reason, though, is not because of the outward appearances.

Once we start focusing on what we'll tell others, we've lost the focus on God. Those we read about today were making a show for all around them to notice. Realize it is not bad for people to see us being faithful. In fact, later in Matthew, Jesus tells the disciples, "What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops."¹ In our reading, Jesus instructs that almsgiving and prayers and fasting be done in secret, so that "your Father who sees in secret will reward you." The significance here is not the reward but the secret - meaning, what is in your heart as you give alms, pray, and fast? God knows. If your intention is to come closer to God and love others as Jesus commanded through almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, then God knows and is pleased. If your intention is to let everyone else know what you're up to, then God knows that, too, and Jesus explains you have missed the point, missed the opportunity, missed the connection.

So if you're caught with ashes today, not because you are running as many errands as possible so as many people as possible can see you've been to church but because you are living your normal life and that means coming into contact with people after you've been to church, God knows. Friends of mine in high school would run into church, grab a bulletin, and head out, bringing their "proof" they went to church back to their parents while they were really out doing something else. Well, God knew that, too. If maybe you thought you came today for "proof," perhaps the Holy Spirit is at work with more for you today than just proof.

We mark our foreheads with ashes and with the words "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return." The sign upon our heads is a reminder that we must die to our old selves before we are born once more, this time through Christ and in Christ, with hearts and minds and hands to love in ways which give glory to God. Through Christ and in Christ means giving to the poor because those in need have needs that you are able to help fill, not because you're already counting the charitable donation you'll claim on next year's tax forms. Through Christ and in Christ means praying for loved ones and just as fervently for your enemies. Through Christ and in Christ means fasting from those things which fill your life in a way that others might otherwise do, including God.

And the "proof" of God's amazing love is this, while we were sinners, while we made a show of our faith for the sake of the show, while we still sometimes make a show of our faith, even while we don't show our faith at all, Christ died for us. We will forget Christ, forget God, forget others, yet we are assured of a forgiveness already given so we can move past the regret of forgetting and back into the habit of the things we have been practicing during Lent in order to come closer to God. These things we practice with intentionality this Lent are not meant to be temporary as the brevity of Lent might suggest – we practice that they might become part of our daily lives. We practice that we might come to know

¹ Matthew 10:27.

God better and better and to become better. We practice that we might be better about doing what we do for others and for God than for ourselves. We practice that we might change our instinct to share with others how hard it can be to do what we do to an instinct to quietly do what is not easy. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: Know our hearts, God, forgive our missteps, and guide us closer to you. Amen.