

Wednesday, March 2, 2022

Ash Wednesday

Isaiah 58.1-12; 2 Corinthians 5.20b—6.10; Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/377498714212024>

(Sermon begins at about 15:00)

“Are You Ready?”

Are you ready? Today is the beginning of Lent—the 40-day journey of preparation for Easter. Traditionally, this is a time when we engage in special Lenten disciplines to help us in our preparations. So, have you decided what you are going to be doing for your Lenten discipline this year?

Traditionally, our Lenten practices revolve around the three disciplines outlined in our reading from the Gospel according to Matthew: giving of alms, prayer, and fasting. We most commonly think of this as including giving up something, like your morning Starbucks beverage of choice, television, chocolate, or any other number of things. Reminiscent of the discipline of fasting Jesus talks about in our Gospel reading. For some, this is a time to take on something additional, particularly by way of outreach ministry—helping at a food pantry, or a homeless shelter, or making additional charitable contributions. Reminiscent of the discipline of almsgiving Jesus talks about in our Gospel reading. And for many, there are additional spiritual practices, such as special devotional readings, like the “Living Well Through Lent” book our two congregations are using, or extra worship services, or study programs, like our joint Lenten program exploring various versions of the Stations of the Cross. Reminiscent of the discipline of prayer Jesus talks about in our Gospel reading.

But why do we engage in these disciplines of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting? And what are they intended to accomplish? It helps to understand that these disciplines are the traditional acts of Jewish religious obligation that were viewed as being integral to one’s relationship with God. As Jesus notes, these were meant to be private devotions, not public demonstrations of one’s piety. These acts are particular ways of demonstrating and being in relationship with God.

Almsgivings—giving money to the poor. Or in a broader sense, giving one’s time or money to benefit those in need, is a means of expressing concern for those who are of particular concern to God—the poor, the homeless, the hungry, the prisoner, the widowed, the orphaned, the marginalized. Giving alms and working with and for those in need is a tangible way of demonstrating love not only for those whom God loves—our neighbors—but also of demonstrating love for God himself.

Prayer is simply communicating and spending time with God. It is an expression of the desire to be with God. It is an attempt to be in relationship with God by expressing our most intimate thoughts and desires directly to God; by expressing our love for God; and by making ourselves available to receive God’s love.

Fasting is about intentionally abstaining from those things that might get in the way of our relationship with God. Those things that we may use to dull the pain of not being in full relationship with God. Those things that we might use to fill the void, in feeble attempts to replace relationship with God. Fasting takes many forms. But at its core, fasting is meant to be a reminder that God ultimately meets all our needs. And to demonstrate that realization to God, along with a resolve to do better. To be opened to accepting what God has to offer.

Note that Jesus is clear that when performing these disciplines, they are to be done in secret. “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” (Mt 6.3-4a). “Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret” (Mt 6.6a). “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” (Mt 6.17-18a). Precisely because these are between the individual and God. These disciplines are meant to be our acts of love and devotion to the One who first loved us. Our acts of love and devotion to the One who loves us no matter who we are or what we may do. Our acts of love that serve to open us up to be more present to God in our daily lives. Paul himself confirms this in our reading from 2 Corinthians. He opens this passage by saying “We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5.20b). We do this as a means of seeking to be reconciled, to be in right relationship, with God.

Our Old Testament reading from Isaiah also gives us further insight into these disciplines and their significance. This passage is part of an oracle contrasting righteous and unrighteous worship. Although the passage from Isaiah primarily addresses fasting, it carries the same implications for the other disciplines of almsgiving and prayer. Specifically, in this passage God is conveying his displeasure at the people’s cavalier attitude regarding fasting. While the postexilic community views fasting as a righteous act—as it should be—God rejects fasting that accompanies any form of oppression or conflict. As God says to Isaiah, “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” (Is 58.6-7). Essentially, that what God desires are not momentary or half-hearted acts of piety, but true and lasting changes that lead to true righteousness. Right relationship with God and one’s neighbor. That the people engage in a way of life that works toward a change in the systems of oppression and injustice that pervade society. Or, as God puts it: in doing so, “you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets to live in” (Is 58.12c).

Our Gospel reading has a refrain that gives us an indication of the seriousness of our spiritual disciplines. For each of the disciplines, Jesus warns that those who give alms, pray, or fast as a means of demonstrating their alleged piety are hypocritical. As Jesus notes, “Truly I tell you, they have received their reward” (Mt 6.2b, 5b, 16b). Engaging in such actions for reward of a more human nature than divine. That others will see and think, “oh, how wonderful and pious he is.” Instead, Jesus assures us when we are doing these disciplines for the right reasons, for the improvement and strengthening of our relationship with God and one another, “your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Mt 6.4b, 6b, 18b). Jesus further explains this in his statement, “but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Mt 6.20). That our true reward in

the proper use of our disciplines is that our relationship with God will be strengthened. And that we will become more fully who God created us and calls us to be.

Weaving together our readings for today with a focus on Lenten disciplines, we begin to see that what we do in our Lenten practices is meant to be serious stuff. That what we do is meant to be a serious statement of our intentions for our relationship with God. As such, what we do is between us and God and should reflect where we are right now in our relationship with God, with an eye toward improving and strengthening that relationship. With the goal of transforming ourselves and our relationship with God. Not just during these 40 days, but ongoing, for the remainder of our lives.

What we do in our Lenten journeys is meant to be a sacramental sign of our entire lives of faith. As I think about the seriousness of what that entails, the seriousness of what that means for us individually and as a faith community, I am reminded of the provocative image of church crafted by Annie Dillard in her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*:

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear straw hats and velvet to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return.

Let us pray that our Lenten disciplines are not just token acts as we make our forty-day journey through Lent, but that they have the potential for real change in our lives, in our ministries, and in our relationships with God. That they have the potential, that they have the power “to draw us out to where we can never return.” Ever closer to who God is calling us to be as his beloved children. Ever closer to who he is calling us to be as the Body of Christ. Ever closer to God’s own heart.

So, again I ask, “are you ready?”