

Wednesday, February 18, 2026

Ash Wednesday

Isaiah 58.1-12; Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21

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“Is Not This the Fast That I Choose?”

As we begin our Lenten journey, we once again hear the standard Gospel reading for Ash Wednesday: Jesus’ commentary regarding three common spiritual practices. The three—almsgiving, prayer, and fasting—forming the foundation for righteous living in the Jewish tradition. Three practices which likewise form the foundation for righteous living in our own Christian tradition. These three practices forming the foundation, the structure, which many Christians identify with the season of Lent. Practices we intentionally engage in during the six-week penitential season of preparation for Easter. Emphasis on the word “penitential.”

Before we go too much farther, it is probably prudent to define our terms, just so we are all on the same page. What do we mean when we talk about almsgiving, prayer, and fasting?

Almsgiving is the giving of aid to those in need. This can be the giving of money; tangible items, such as food or clothing; or even one’s time and talents, such as working at the Food Bank or Feed My Lambs. The idea being that in almsgiving, we care for those who are of greatest concern to God: the poor and the marginalized. And in so doing, help to bring us in closer alignment with God’s values and purposes, and thereby closer to God.

Prayer is intentional time communicating with God. This takes a number of forms, depending on what works for and speaks to the individual: doing regular structured prayer services, such as the Daily Offices of Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, and Compline; more meditative practices such as Centering Prayer or Lectio Divina, a form of praying with and reflecting on a passage of scripture. The idea being that in prayer practices, we are focusing on communicating with and being in relationship with God.

Fasting is the intentional abstaining from the consumption of something. Again, this takes many forms, with the most common being abstaining from food for a specified period of time, or the giving up of a particular food item or category. Fasting can also be abstaining from a particular activity, such as watching the news or perhaps from watching television altogether; or abstaining from such things as social media, eating out, or shopping. What may be the object of fasting is really limited only by one’s imagination. The idea being that in fasting, we are intentionally removing or limiting that in our own lives which may be getting in the way of closer relationship with God.

Often times, fasting and almsgiving are even linked, with the money saved from abstaining from something then being used for almsgiving. Similarly, the time saved by abstaining from an activity might be used to engage in a particular prayer practice, thereby linking fasting and prayer.

With our terms now defined, I have to admit that I do have some problems with the emphasis on the threefold practices of almsgiving, praying, and fasting as the focus of our Lenten disciplines. Before you run off calling the Bishop, saying “Fr. Michael does not believe in almsgiving, prayer, and fasting for Lent,” hear me out. To be clear, I do not have any issues whatsoever with these practices. I do regularly engage in practices of almsgiving and prayer, and occasionally fasting, although I could probably do better in that area. So, it is not the practices themselves that are at issue. Rather, it goes back to my previous statement of “emphasis on the word ‘penitential.’”

Now, while I cannot speak to any individual’s motivation for doing what they do during Lent, it often seems that Lenten practices are entered into as a means of penitence. As a form of punishment. Of self-punishment. That the practices are something to be endured for the tortuously long six-week period of Lent, often accompanied by a countdown to Easter when the Lenten practices can be cast into the dustbin of history. At least until next year when we reluctantly haul them out again for the next running of the Lenten gauntlet.

I suppose it really comes down to intent. Why do we do what we do at Lent? Is it because we have some notion that we have to give up something to appear righteous before God? That we have to punish ourselves into trying to do better at being in right relationship with God? Or is it because we genuinely want to be in deeper relationship with God? And if the latter, if we want to be in deeper relationship with God, don’t we want that for more than just the six-week run-up to Easter?

This is really what Jesus is railing against in today’s Gospel. Doing the respective practices of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting for show rather than for real transformation. Doing the respective practices for the wrong reason. Now, in each of the examples Jesus uses, he is condemning those who engage in the respective activity for show, to demonstrate to others how good and righteous they are because they give to the poor, or because they pray regularly, or because they fast regularly. In each case, Jesus likens such activity to that of “the hypocrites.” The term “hypocrite” originally referred to an actor who played a part, as in a theatrical production. Over time, it came to refer to public demonstrations of compassion but without having genuine concern; making a show of compassion not out of genuine caring but rather for personal gain—to look good in the eyes of other or to make themselves feel good about themselves. Rather, what Jesus says regarding each of the practices is that they should be engaged in for “your Father who is in secret.” Engaged in solely as a means of benefiting and deepening one’s relationship with God.

That being the case, shouldn’t our spiritual practices of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, be ongoing and not just for six weeks of the year? As children of God, don’t we want to continually seek to be in deeper relationship with God as opposed to only being in deeper relationship for a month and half before Easter? After all, it is worth reminding ourselves that the part of Matthew’s Gospel that we hear today is actually a part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’ lengthy sermon that focuses on what it means to enter into right relationship with God.

Admittedly, I am splitting hairs. And I do not mean to imply that any of us don’t care about deepening our relationship the other 46 weeks of the year. The real point is that our Lenten

disciplines are meant to be an intentional act of seeking to go deeper in our relationship with God, with the objective of making those changes permanent. To try out what might facilitate going deeper in our relationship with God and seeing what works, seeing what sticks. Rather than going deeper for six weeks and then returning to the status quo, the real goal is to go deeper with these practices so that they become permanent, become a part of who we are. And then once they are a permanent part of who we are, to find other ways of going deeper still. And then deeper still. And deeper still.

The other issue with emphasis on the threefold Lenten disciplines of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, is that it focuses on the personal, on the individual. Not that that is a bad thing. As indicated, it is ultimately about our personal relationship with God and how we seek to strengthen and deepen that relationship. But what we can easily forget when we focus on our personal Lenten practices is that we are not just individuals in relationship with God. We are part of a broader community. The great commandment is not just to love God. The great commandment also includes loving our neighbors as ourselves. Our relationship with God is both personal and communal. Our personal relationship with God is meant to translate into how we live our lives in community.

This is really the topic of our Old Testament reading from Isaiah. And one that has a direct connection with what Jesus is talking about in terms of our relationship with God and with our own practices.

Isaiah starts off questioning and criticizing some of the same issues as Jesus does six centuries later, using the practice of fasting as a “catchall,” for the various practices and means by which we seek deeper relationship with God. Speaking for God, Isaiah says, “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble yourselves, but you do not notice?’ Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day. . . Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble myself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?” Raising the question of why we do what we do. Effectively an indictment that the fasting and other practices engaged in by the people are not truly in keeping with God’s purposes. In fact, this whole section addresses the issue of righteous and unrighteous worship after the return from exile in Babylon. Recognizing that God’s salvation is being deferred until the community’s iniquities have been addressed and come to an end: “Is not this the fast that I chose: 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? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; Your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.”

God’s response is clear. The way we seek to be in solidarity with God, to be in deeper relationship with God, is to demonstrate our love for God by demonstrating our love for our neighbors. To do the hard work of social justice and seeking to bolster the structures and systems that care for those who are of greatest concern to God: the poor, the unhoused, the immigrant, the marginalized. Reminding us that our quest for deeper relationship with God,

while starting off with personal practices, actually has broader implications. Reaching far beyond what we do in the secrecy of our own hearts and inner lives.

This is what Jesus implies in the concluding statement of today's Gospel: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." If we truly desire to deepen our relationship with God, we make deposits in that treasury through our spiritual practices, continually adding to that treasure. For if we add to that treasury, only to withdraw it six weeks later, where is the real growth? Be it in our relationship with God or in our care for our neighbors with whom we are also called to deeper relationship?

As we begin yet another Lenten season, how might we, individually and collectively, deepen our relationships with God and with our neighbor, not just for the next six weeks, but in an ongoing way? That is where we will find our true treasure, not just in heaven, but also in the world around us.