

Lay aside your mask: God sees and loves you

Ash Wednesday Sermon by Pastor Patrick Fish
February 11, 2018
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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.

—Matthew 6:1-6 (NRSV)

Grace and Peace to you, from Christ, who sees you. Who wants us to move. Move from self to Christ. From me to him. From guilt-ridden to grace-driven. Amen

* * *

Move 1: From self-directed to Christ-directed

My first reaction to today's Scripture was: YIKES!

Upon first glance, our Gospel and the ritual practice of smudging ashes on our foreheads seem to be at complete odds with one another.

But then after reflecting more on Jesus' words, I realized Jesus isn't condemning spiritual practices. What Jesus is warning against and condoning are the reasons, intentions, and purposes behind spiritual practices.

In no way is Jesus against praying, fasting, and giving.

All those things draw us closer to God. All those are ways of responding to God's grace and ways we engage in our life with God.

But what Jesus is concerned with is the *why*. Why do we do these spiritual practices? Why do we pray? Why do we fast? Why do we give?

Do we do so to draw attention to ourselves? To win the approval of our peers? For our own glory? To be seen by others?

Because if those are our intentions, Jesus says we have already received our reward here on earth.

Jesus is critiquing the hypocrites. Those who play the part but whose hearts and actions don't match. Those who act well but whose motivations aren't genuine or authentic.

Now, it's easy to distance ourselves from the hypocrites Jesus is speaking out against. And think we aren't those people. "I don't like to pray in public. See, this is why!"

During Lent, we turn that finger from pointing outward, and we turn it inward. And we realize that, like everyone else, we fall short of the glory of God. We, like everyone else, can be hypocritical at times. We, like everyone else, need Jesus.

Jesus is speaking to us. To you, who has a genuine desire to have a real relationship with God. Who want to do it the right way.

And Jesus tells you and me: Pray, but don't do it to win the approval of others. Give, but don't do it to show the world how successful and important you are. Fast, but not in a way that draws attention to yourself.

Jesus wants us to engage in spiritual practices that draw us closer to him. Jesus warns us against engaging in "spiritual self-congratulations." (Matt Skinner, *workingpreacher.org*)

Jesus sincerely wants your heart. Sincerely wants you to know of his grace and live fully into it. He wants you to grow deeper. To grow stronger in Christ.

And to do that, we engage in spiritual practices. Not spiritual self-fives, but spiritual practices that help us engage, encounter, and experience Christ.

We ask ourselves this day, and throughout Lent, how do we become more Christ-directed? How do we become more Christ-centered? How do we move from being such self-directed mortal beings to being Christ-directed beings?

This movement is what Christ wants for us.

Move 2: From sinner to forgiven sinner

One would think Jesus would have a field day with the ritual of ashes. That he'd be at odds with us smudging our faces.

But then we remember that Jesus was never against spiritual practices. He's always for the tangible ways we engage him. Like Baptism. Like Holy Communion. The ritual of ashes is a tangible way for us to grow deeper and grow closer to God.

As theologian and writer David Lose says, "Ashes were never intended to be marks of piety. Rather, they are reminders of our mortality" (David Lose, *workingpreacher.org*)

The ritual of ashes draws us together as a community. Tonight, we come together drawn by God. That smudge is a reminder that we aren't different from the others in this place or in this world. There is no "us" and "them." "Those people" and "us." There is just *us*. God's beloved children.

A pastor once pointed out to me that we can't see our own ashes. All we can see is everyone else's marks of contrition. That's the point. The ashes aren't about just me and my failings before God.

The ashes are a sign of our mutual personhood. Our mutual dependence on Christ. A sign that we are all members of the same one body of Christ.

Today, we remember our shared humanity. Our shared condition. Our shared life. We receive those ashes and remember we are all sinners. But, thanks to Christ, we are *forgiven* sinners. We receive those ashes and remember we are all mortals. But, thanks to Christ, we are mortals who inherit everlasting life.

The ashes remind us of who we are: mortal sinners. But the sign of the cross reminds us whose we are as well: by God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are forgiven and have eternal life.

So, yes, we come before the cross and repent of our sin. That's where we start. But we don't stay there. Thanks to Christ, we move to forgiveness.

We move to hearing again and believing again that Jesus came not to make bad people good but instead to make dead people alive. To bring light into our darkness. To know we aren't defined by what others see. We are defined and saved by the God who sees.

Move 3: From being an iceberg to being worthy

To close, I want us to imagine an iceberg.

My wife and I took an Alaskan cruise for our honeymoon. Fun trip. We were definitely the youngest couple by far on the cruise. Everyone liked telling us what we needed to do to have a happy life together.

The best part of the trip was seeing all the glaciers and icebergs on the water. I would stand out on the balcony of our room and yell, "Iceberg, dead ahead."

Absolutely beautiful. What's amazing about icebergs, though, is that what we see is just the tip of the iceberg. Most of the iceberg is submerged and underwater.

I think this is a great analogy for us. When we interact with others, the world only sees a fraction of who we are. And many of us only are only comfortable showing a fraction of who we are. We're terrified of what people might think if we showed a bit more of what's lying beneath the surface.

And for much of my life, that's how I lived. Playing the part. Hiding whatever the world found uncomfortable beneath the surface. Until I realized this isn't the life God intended for us. Living that way was utterly exhausting.

And when I didn't just know about grace but accepted it with my whole heart, I stopped being an iceberg. I stopped wearing the mask. Because the grace Jesus extends isn't just to the fraction of the person. It's to the whole person.

Jesus died for your whole self. Not just for the parts you like to show, but whole self.

Friends, I pray that truth sinks into your heart. I pray you hear that incredible news. I pray that today and for the remainder of Lent, you move from trying to earn God's attention and earn God's favor. And instead, know you already have it. God sees you. God loves you. God declares you are worthy.

We admit our mortality today. But in the same breath we admit how God's grace has changed our lives forever. That because of Christ, death is not our end. That, because of Christ, life gets the last word.

Amen.

Resources include:

David Lose, workingpreacher.org

Matt Skinner, workingpreacher.org

All scripture references are from New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Copyright © 2018, Patrick J. Fish