

CHRIST MEMORIAL EPISCOPAL CHURCH, NORTH BROOKFIELD, MA

SERMON

Rev. Dr. Paula Winsor Sage

ASH WEDNESDAY (February 14, 2018)

MATTHEW 6:1-6,16-21

PRAYER: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, Lord, who are our strength and our redeemer. AMEN

Good Evening! Welcome to tonight's quiet service. We are marking tonight the beginning of Lent, the 40 day period when we are supposed to take a good look at our lives and into our hearts to see how we can improve on our walk with God.

Those of you who have been in the Episcopal Church for a while I am sure notice some small changes in our service during Lent. What are some of these? (Alleluia gone, gold and silver gone, hymns quieter, Gloria gone at beginning of service, sometimes Penitential Order added at beginning, no blessing). The changes are there to remind us that Lent is a time NOT for business as usual, a time NOT to take for granted all the positive things in our lives. Instead it is a time to remember that all that we have comes from God and ask ourselves what we can

do to draw closer to God. That is so that when the Gloria comes back, for example, we sing it with renewed enthusiasm and joy and praise to God. It is so that, after 40 days of suppressed Alleluia's that on Easter Morning when they come we really shout them. It isn't that we are supposed to punish ourselves or that God leaves us during Lent, but we are supposed to recall the suffering of Jesus at the end of his time here on earth as the season goes on, and we are supposed to think about our own sinfulness and ask forgiveness.

We are meant to take a step back from taking all the good things for granted and think about what God has given us and whether we have been grateful enough.

Are we following Jesus and trying to obey what he asks us to do? Are we loving others and trying to help and not thinking of ourselves as Jesus did? Despite all the good that you all do, I think all of us can, if we take time, find some things we missed or some things we wish we had done differently. That is why, beginning with quiet worship on Ash Wednesday, we take time to reflect during Lent. And

that is why we get ashes marked on our foreheads--to mark our fragile humanity and remind us that all that is good comes from God.

Removing some of the outward signs of our praise to God so that we concentrate on what our hearts are really doing and feeling is one way we practice Lent.

Today's Gospel calls attention to another part of this same process. It looks at things that Jesus did and that are recommended to us to do as a good way of life--giving to the poor, fasting and praying. But Jesus is here asking us to check in on ourselves to look at whether or not we are doing these good things for the right reasons. (He also reminds us of the danger of acquiring things and keeping them for ourselves). The point here is to get us to stop thinking of ourselves and put God and other people first. Yes, we should give and fast and pray, but Jesus is warning us that if we forget the reason why we do these things--that is to honor God and try to get to know Him better--there will be no benefit for us in drawing closer to God or to eternal life. If you advertise your giving or your fasting or your praying, then you are doing it to get recognition for yourselves from people,

not from God--who already knows. That earthly reward will feel good here and now, Jesus says, but it will do nothing to bring you closer to heaven. Christianity, in general, is a system of belief very much about delayed gratification. God promises us eternal life with him--but not now. God promises us freedom from pain and healing--but maybe not just now. God asks us to good to others and put them first, but the reward will come later, not now.

Lent is designed for us to reflect and to remind ourselves that any good we do comes from God working through us and not from our own goodness. It is a time set apart for us to reflect on this and to practice denying our own worth as we thank God for making it possible for us to do any good at all. (That is why we exercise discipline like giving thing up or doing extra prayers during this season).

The simple truth is that we cannot be a blessing to others if God does not bless us. When we are a blessing to others, we are simply passing on what God has given us. It has nothing to do with our own goodness. Waiting for recognition from others or basking it in that recognition keeps us away from God. So if you go

around sometimes feeling unappreciated, please stop and think why you are doing the things you want to be appreciated for. All good works are motivated by God and return to God. Lent is the time to remind us that we are not Good without God. So when people thank you that is fine, but if you discover yourself not feeling satisfied until you get those thanks, this Gospel is for you! I sometimes think I am working against this Gospel when I try to remember to thank everyone who does all the good things that so many of you do for the church! We are really all doing all of it together for God, and He already thanks you by blessing your lives, so should I say anything? I still feel grateful to all of you, though, and it doesn't feel right to say nothing, but more and more I don't name a lot of names because of this Gospel. You who DO know who you are and so does God! No need to tell anyone about it or expect peoples' thanks.

God thanks you with his blessing.

But that blessing is something that changes during Lent also. At the end of the service, just before dismissal, I always ask you to stand and raise my hand for the

blessing. It is something I love to do, and it is a responsibility given to priests at ordination in our church that no one else is authorized to do (like consecration of elements and absolution). I take passing on God's promise to you that you have his good will and that through faith he has promised you eternal life and forgiveness very seriously. I never do it casually or lightly, and I see many of you eagerly awaiting it. It matters! You will notice tonight if you haven't noticed other years, that during this season priests offer a prayer instead of a blessing. God will continue to bless us this Lenten season, but we won't have the reminder. He wants us to meditate on his power to give it and the benefits it has to us, so that when it returns on Easter Day we will appreciate it more, it will be received with the same joy as the Alleluias. Wise words for Lent: Sometimes we need to miss things in order to really appreciate them! AMEN