

Ash Wednesday – February 14, 2018

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

So here we are, getting ready to practice the single most public act of piety in our entire repertoire: being marked with a cross of ashes on our foreheads for anyone to see. And the gospel reading chosen for this occasion – the same one we read every year on Ash Wednesday – is Jesus telling us to beware of practicing our piety before others! What were the lectionary folks thinking when they gave us that reading? Or, maybe we should ask, why do we keep doing this ritual that lets our piety be seen by others when we leave this building? Surely you've noticed this strange juxtaposition before.

So maybe we should stop marking ourselves with ashes. Many Lutherans abandoned the practice in the centuries following the Reformation. I don't remember it being done in my congregation when I was a child. It has been recovered only in my lifetime. Or at least we could stop reading this Matthew 6 text if we want to keep using ashes. Either way, it might make us feel better. It might take away the sting of Jesus calling those who flaunt their religiosity hypocrites. And then we could console ourselves by noting how we are not like *those* people. But removing the dissonance between Jesus' words and our practice will not remove our hypocrisy. It would be a token act, a distraction from the deeper issue.

What I am going to suggest instead is that we embrace the dissonance, that we see the ashes on our foreheads not only as a reminder of our mortality, but also of our hypocrisy. Because let's face it. Even apart from our ash crosses, we do "[practice our] piety before others, in order to be seen by them." We all put on a show, to one extent or another, for the benefit of others. There's been a lot of attention in recent years to how we do this on social media. We show the good parts of our life, the things we want other people to see so they will think we're interesting, successful, or "blessed." There was a meme floating around a while back featuring the Most Interesting Man in the World. "I don't always go to the gym," it said, "but when I do, I make sure it's on Facebook." And then, of course, we edit out the bad stuff – our failures, our embarrassing moments, or just our bad hair days. The result of everyone doing this is a measurable increase in depression for many people who become convinced that everyone else's life is so much better than their own. And long before there was social media we were doing this at church. I've met people who think they don't belong in church because people who go to church are "good people," and they don't feel they measure up.

We put on a show because we crave approval. We put stock in status and reputation. We make our self-esteem depend upon what others think of us. We allow our hearts to be directed inward, away from God, away from other people, focused only on ourselves. We treat those around us as our cheering section and we try to make God our enabler.

But secretly we know that this is not sustainable. Because even if we can keep up the charade, ultimately we know that what others see and approve of is not the real us. The real us we keep hidden away. We can fool others, maybe, and even ourselves for a while. But we cannot fool God, the one who sees in secret, the one who knows our hearts, the one who knows that we are

not as good, or as generous, or as respectable, or as pious as we pretend, that we have neither feared, nor loved, nor trusted God with our whole heart. And we have certainly not loved our neighbor as ourselves.

This is the reality that we are called to face up to on this Ash Wednesday. So, Face up! Receive the cross of Christ on your forehead. Ears open! Hear those uncomfortable words, “you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Bear this reminder of your mortality on your body for an hour or so this evening. It is a mark that is also a reminder of your brokenness, of your sinful self-centeredness, and of your hypocrisy. Be who you really are and embrace the dissonance of Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent. Because the real you, the sinner you, the hypocrite you, is the you God loves and forgives. The real you is the you Jesus was born for, died for, and was raised again for.

Martin Luther put it this way in a letter probably written to Philip Melancthon in 1521. It’s one of the most misunderstood and misused Luther quotes, but also one of the most incisive: “If [God’s] *grace* is true, you must bear a *true* and not a *fictitious sin*. God does not save people who are only *fictitious* sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the world.” (LW 48:281)

This is not license to sin, or encouragement to sin, as some critics of Luther have claimed. It is an appeal to own up to the real you so that the real Christ – the one who forgives and redeems real sinners – can be of help to you.

The good news of God’s profound grace in the face of our profound sinfulness is a game changer. When by God’s grace that news breaks through and sinks in, then the Holy Spirit gets to work begins to redirect our hearts – away from ourselves and toward God, and then on to others. In faith our piety becomes secret, but fervent. In love, our almsgiving becomes anonymous, but generous. In hope, our fasting, hidden from others, becomes a joyful discipline of thanksgiving and recommitment to God and God’s reconciling and recreating mission for us and the whole world.

May God bless our observance of Lent, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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