

February 22, 2012

**Ash Wednesday**

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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There is a conundrum in our Ash Wednesday liturgy. We listen to Jesus' exhortation in Matthew to not practice piety before others, to pray in secret lest we become hypocrites. Then we step forward to be smudged with a very obvious and public sign of our faith.

Conundrum. Confusing.

I find Jesus' declarations in this section of Matthew to be difficult and frustrating. It would seem that Matthew's Jesus is against public displays of worship altogether. If we are not to pray in public or show material piety, where does that leave the worshipping body? Are we to give up liturgy altogether in favor of private prayer in a dark closet, alone?

Of course this is not what Jesus is getting at.

Jesus is talking about hypocrisy. And in Matthew's day, public prayer was the norm. It was everywhere. And the more obvious and outward the display, in common understanding of the time, the more deep the faith must be. It was this kind of public piety Jesus was teaching against, the kind that says "the bigger, the louder, the showier, the better." Jesus was pointing to those who felt it necessary to draw attention to themselves rather than to that which truly deserves attention.

We live in a different time and in a different place from our Gospel writer. That does not make Jesus' admonitions any less true or any less important to our daily lives as Christians, it just means that the message can be focused differently.

In this post-Christian society, most mainline Christians are in no danger of practicing our piety before others. Public displays of faith outside of a church building are few and far between, even here in the Bible Belt. It seems that we have taken the Ash Wednesday Gospel message to a new level, praying privately in that dark closet all the time, being very very careful not to allow our faith to be seen at all in public.

But this is just an inversion of the same message. This is a different kind of hypocrisy.

This is the kind of hypocrisy that helps us believe that we can come to church on Sunday, hear a good word, take Communion then not think about it again for another week... or month... or whenever it is convenient to show up again.

This is the kind of hypocrisy that lets us think that the golf club dues are as mandatory as the water bill but a pledge to the church is an optional pittance that we can pay if and when we feel up to it.

This is the kind of hypocrisy that allows all of us to believe that the good work of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and soothing the downtrodden are *thankfully* being done by someone else. Because we're, you know, just too busy for all that volunteer stuff.

So my challenge to you today, Ash Wednesday, is about that smudge of ashes on your head. That smudge is a mark to remind you that you are finite, that you are mortal, that you will die. It is also a mark to remind you that despite your fallenness, you are beloved, that you will join Christ in the resurrection, that you are *Christian*.

In answer to Jesus' exhortation in Matthew, I challenge you to think about those ashes before you leave this building. Are you uncomfortable with the thought of leaving them on there, a mark for everyone in the office or carpool line or grocery store to see? They might judge you, they might think things about you that aren't true. They might not. Keep those ashes on your head as a witness to what you know to be true: that you are a sinner but that you are redeemed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Do you wear your ashes proudly to show everyone how good you are, that you did indeed go to church like you were supposed to? People need to see that you are one of the good guys after all, that you are faithful and pious. Otherwise they might think you a heathen or someone who is all talk and no church attendance, right? I challenge you instead to take a tissue and wipe those ashes off. Witness instead with your quiet piety. Turn attention away from yourself and back to where it is rightfully due.

We are broken and imperfect. We waffle between that which we know is of great and lasting value and that which is fleeting and insubstantial. We draw distinctions between ourselves and others for our own personal gain. We make bad choices because we are just flawed human beings.

But that doesn't get us off the hook. Not now, not ever. We have never been given permission by God to throw up our hands and give in to hypocrisy or apathy. We are bound by our faith and by our belovedness to keep wrestling with both angels and demons, those around us and those within us. That is the path to real righteousness, not by excessive false piety and not by hiding behind secular excuses, but by working diligently and with integrity to pray, to give, to love in a way that honors God above all else.