
It's Ash Wednesday. Our Lenten journey has begun. Our Scripture passage today comes from Matthew chapter six. Hear the word of the Lord:

“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.

And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites; for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but your Father who is in secret; and your father who sees in secret will reward you”.
(Matthew 6:1-5a, 16-18 NRSV)

We will come to the end of ourselves, dust to dust.

It's Ash Wednesday, and on this day, we reflect on our impermanence, our mortality. Most people have experienced it through others with unbearable loss. When someone you love is gone from this side of eternity.

What about for you - for yourself? Do you live life with the urgency and humility of your impermanence?

Our Lenten journey begins today. Can we be present with our own mortality without having an existential crisis? Are we willing to confront the sobering reality that life is fleeting without escaping to eat, drink, and be merry, or being paralyzed by the inevitability of death?

When our daughters, Bailee and Jessica, were young, I stared down my impermanence. Every time my husband, Joey, and I were traveling together, I would go into a tailspin, concerned if something happened to both of us, who would rear our daughters. It became this whole thing steeped in fear, grasping at my own helplessness and impermanence.

Fear is not the posture of Ash Wednesday. Fear says, "Control and grasp." Ash Wednesday invites openness and trust.

We are impermanent. Dust to dust.

So does your life matter? Humanity longs to be important, but the human, the human inclination can take root and run rampant toward postures of superiority. We see it here in our scripture with the hypocrites. We see it in our lifetimes in white supremacy. And when we look at history, superiority becomes control, leading to spiritual arrogance, ethnic genocide, or even crucifixion.

And when we are clear - and when we are clear and honest with ourselves, we confess our own need to feel important or to be seen. In Matthew 5, Jesus preaches the Beatitudes, and he points to the influence of salt and light and wraps up with a litany of laws and an invitation to do our interior work regarding the hidden motives of our hearts. And then, in Matthew 6, Jesus says, "Be careful! Be careful, pious people. Don't be self-deceived, church. Watch out, lay folks and preachers and practitioners - be careful not to practice your piety in public in order to be seen."

The seduction emerges for conservatives and liberals and traditionalists and progressives and centrists and moderates. The temptation to gregarious league all to our goodness or freely flaunt our faithfulness in order to be seen.

What if - what if we shifted from wanting to be seen to paying attention to who we see?

Who do you see?

Would you consider praying that the Holy Spirit would show you the unseen people in the community in which you live? Do you know people's names and stories? Jesus is always hanging out with the unseen people.

Church, we pray for revival. We pray for more people to come to our buildings. What if Jesus' prayer is that we leave our buildings and that we come to join him loving others without feelings of superiority, without spiritual arrogance?

On this Ash Wednesday, when we begin our 40-day journey toward Easter (not counting Sundays), we are stopped in our tracks to face who we really are. We are invited to get off our high horses, to get over ourselves, and to be seen for who we really are. Not the way we want others to see us.

Jesus is asking us to see when we create images of ourselves so that people see us. People who do not know that Jesus loves them are not impressed with our collective piety. Jesus is not impressed with our collective piety.

The spiritual pride of the Pharisees repulsed Jesus. Jesus wants us to join the unseen people in our communities so that they know they are seen by God. And then, through them, we see Jesus.

Hear the good news: God sees you! You are important because God has claimed you and named you through baptism. You've become a part of something bigger than yourself. You are initiated into Christ's holy church. You are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation. And we are not superior or more important than anyone else. If you want to see Jesus, live in relationship with the unseen people in your community.

We are impermanent. With humility and openness, face your mortality.

In closing, I want to share a wonderful new book out by Kate Bowler, Duke Divinity School historian and beautiful, honest podcaster of "[Everything Happens](#)." Her new book, out just a few weeks ago, is entitled "[Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day: Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs, and In-Betweens](#)." If you need fresh prayer language for your Lenten journey or for someone you love, get this book.

Let me close with this blessing, "Not Your Best Self."

God, I can't tell which person I will be today.

Kind and loving.

Turn the other cheek, and I'll be right here.

Soft but strong. I will keep no record of wrongs.

I might be someone else entirely, brittle and judgment.

I'm taking my share, and you deal with it alone.

Hard, but weak. I will keep every record.

I'm an accountant in this world that does not give me what I'm owed.

God, these multiple selves. You know - of course you know - are parts of a whole.

You send the love I have to give. You grieve the pain that causes me to withhold.

You send your spirit every day not to stitch us back together but to heal every tender part from the inside out.

So in the meantime, bless this generous self.

Bless this breakable self.

Bless these many parts and make them whole. Amen.

May we observe a holy Lent?