

Day 1 - Ash Wednesday

Bishop Connie Shelton

It's Ash Wednesday, and we're beginning our Lenten journey together. Hear these words from Matthew 6, selected verses.

1 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.

2 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.

*3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,
4 so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

5 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.

16 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.

17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,

18 so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

—

Several years ago, I took the “B” word out of my vocabulary. You do know the “B” word? BUSY! The word people use to acknowledge that they have many demands on their lives, time is limited, a lot of people want a piece of them, want time with them. If I am BUSY, I am saying to you that “I’m not sitting around idly. I’m out there making a difference. I’m changing the world.”

Over the last ten years, I’ve reflected on my own life about what I am needing people to know about me when I tell them I am BUSY. Connected to that word for me was the deep need that I was seen, that I was important, that I mattered. Do you hear that? I found myself equating being “busy” with being “important.” At the core, I needed to know that my life mattered, that I had purpose, that I was seen.

On this Ash Wednesday, when we begin our forty-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” and to be seen for who we really are - not the way we want others to see us.

In our passage from Matthew 6 we just read, Jesus tells us to be careful about how we practice our personal piety in public. What is your deepest need when piously praying in public, or giving with gusto, or fasting with flare? Jesus is asking us to pause and own...when we are attempting to create “images” of ourselves SO THAT people see us!

North Carolina United Methodists, I am very concerned about our witness in the world. There is an internal wrestling match happening in many of our congregations and in our denomination where people are attempting to “publicly make sure others see how spiritual they are.” What are

ways we can decide who is MORE spiritual? Do we look for a show of hands? Shall we take a vote?

And we hear Jesus say, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them.” Or, in Eugene Peterson’s translation of *The Message*, “Be especially careful when you are trying to be good so that you don’t make a performance out of it. It might be good theater,” Peterson says, “but the God who made you won’t be applauding.”

I encourage us this Lenten season to resist being so “busy” - making sure everyone knows how important and spiritual we are - that we miss Jesus. I invite us to ask ourselves, “is voting on who is more spiritual” or “asking for a raising of hands” a way Jesus is asking your congregation to bear witness to the love of Jesus in your community?

For Lent 2023, we celebrate the ongoing co-creation of new places for new people to encounter Jesus and gather into communion with other disciples. This happens with new faith communities, and it happens in every single church in our conference! So, how is your church creating a new place for new people, outside the walls of your church, so that people know that are loved and seen by Jesus?

I have seen in our district gatherings across NC amazingly gifted clergy and amazingly gifted laity excited about all that God is doing in their congregations and communities! Refocusing on making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world brings to light our important shared work of reaching new people who do not yet know of Jesus’ profound and unconditional love!

People who don’t yet know that Jesus loves them are not impressed by our collective piety. Jesus is not impressed with our collective piety. Distractions of who is most pious or spiritual actually teed off Jesus. The pride of the Pharisees is one thing that appears to repulse Jesus (and the other is when people try exploiting the vulnerability of others). Jesus simply wants us to join Jesus with the unseen people in our communities, so they know they are seen by God...through our love.

Do you want to be seen? Do you want to know how important you are? Set aside your busy-ness and your need to create an image of being spiritual. And hear the good news: God sees you. You matter. 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 in Christ’s holy church! You are incorporated into God’s mighty acts of salvation! Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen... by them! You are seen by the God of the universe who comes near in Jesus and remains near through Christ’s Spirit. May God give us grace to practice a Holy Lent. Amen.