

Ash Wednesday
February 21, 2007
Poulsbo
Pastor Alison Shane

Psalm 51
Joel 2:1-2, 12-19
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:2
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and risen Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

“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.”

That always feels a little weird to me, since we’re all sitting here with ashes on our foreheads for everyone to see. But it’s not really weird. “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.” There’s a difference between practicing our piety “in order to be seen” by others and practicing our piety because it is just part of our faith.

It is that practicing of our piety, engaging in the disciplines of faith, that the season of Lent encourages us to do.

Isn’t it funny how those not in the church can be completely ignorant of Christian practices and the liturgical calendar, but come Ash Wednesday, and everybody’s asking, “What did you give up for Lent?” The idea of giving something up for Lent is an old practice, and it is a good one. But it can devolve into exactly the sort of troublesome behavior that Jesus is talking about. “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.”

Someone gives up chocolate for Lent (to be healthier, of course), and then proceeds to whine for 6 weeks about not “being able” to have chocolate.

Another gives up caffeine for Lent (to be healthier, of course), and proceeds to make everyone around them miserable with their six weeks of grumpy.

One person I know gave up his car for Lent, a practice which can result in empathy for those who can’t afford a car or a benefit to the environment, but instead meant he was constantly begging for rides: “I gave up my car for Lent. Can you take me to Target?”

“What did you give up for Lent?” is exactly the question Jesus seeks to draw us away from. “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.”

Giving up these things is not in itself wrong. Each of these examples could have been a beneficial spiritual discipline for Lent, if they had been done for the purpose of giving up the self to turn toward God and others.

That’s why our faith has practices. Faith practices are supposed to focus us. Faith practices are supposed to open us up to the world around us, to God at work in us and in the world. Faith practices are supposed to turn us away from ourselves, away from our own desires, away from our own destructive habits, and turn us toward God and neighbor.

Giving up something for Lent is about giving up ourselves for the sake of something bigger.

And while Jesus warns us against flaunting our disciplines in public, we do practice some of these things in public, because faith practices are communal as well as individual. So we come together to worship. We come together to hear Scripture and study God’s Word. We come

together to pray. We even come together to give, knowing that our giving is more powerful (and the giver more cheerful) when we give and serve together. We share the gospel with others because, well, it's a sign of something not-quite-right when we share the gospel with ourselves. We practice our faith together. But we don't practice faith together in order to be seen by each other. We practice faith together because our faith is not just between us and God. We practice faith together because we need other people to participate in our faith, and they need us.

So go ahead and give up something for Lent. Give up yourself. Learn to pray in a new way and learn to listen to Scripture in a new way so that God might speak to you in a new way. Learn to share your experience of Jesus not to convert but to bring hope and comfort. Learn to give in a way that resonates with you and helps others.

The cross on your forehead today reminds you that we have sullied the promises we received in baptism. Our sin, our selfishness has disgraced that which brings grace. But while we are dust and to dust we shall return, that dust, our sin, death does not have the last word. Because God keeps promises. God keeps gracing you. God keeps forgiving you and loving you. That is why we practice our faith. Because God is faithful.

The ash cross of our sin remains on us, and through it God calls us to take up our cross, to take on sacrificial love for those around us, to share that unspeakably abundant love of God with others, to give up ourselves. So we practice our faith, not in the hope of receiving a reward, but because the practice is itself a reward. We practice our faith, not in the hope of atoning for the hurt our sin has caused, but because God has shown us love and grace in the face of our sin, and we can't wait to experience that love and grace more fully and for others to experience it too.

So we practice our faith. We practice our piety. And God turns us again.

Amen