

Robin Dodge  
Holy Faith, Santa Fe  
1 March 2017

Ash Wednesday  
Joel 2.1-2, 12-17  
Psalm 103.8-14  
2 Cor. 5.20b-6.10  
Mt. 6.1-6, 16-21

In the name of the one, true, and living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

In today's Gospel reading appointed for Ash Wednesday, Jesus focuses on our motivation for doing the things we do. He says, "Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father who is in heaven."

It's a good thing that Jesus is talking about our motivation, and not our conduct alone. Giving alms to the needy, praying, and fasting are all things we are called to do in keeping a holy Lent, this forty-day period of self-examination and repentance in which we prepare ourselves to face once again the mystery of why Jesus would be crucified, die, and rise again for us. But Jesus doesn't say not to give alms, pray, or fast; instead he cautions us to examine why we do them.

Jesus says, "Sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do...that they may be praised by men....And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray...at the street corners, that they may be seen by men....And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men."

Instead, Jesus says, "[W]hen you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you....[W]hen you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in

secret will reward you....[W]hen you fast, anoint your head and wash your face [as if you were going to a feast], that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

When Jesus talks about our motivation, he is reminding us it is better to please God than to please those around us. Do we want to be seen by others to be praised, like the hypocrites, or do we want to be seen by our Father in heaven to be rewarded? Are we storing up treasures on earth or treasures in heaven? Jesus tells us that where our treasure is, there our heart will be also. When we store up earthly treasures we know our heart on earth is mortal. If we store up heavenly treasures our heart in heaven will be eternal.

It's also a good thing that Jesus is talking about our motivation and not our conduct alone on this Ash Wednesday, because I used to have difficulty reconciling today's Gospel lesson of practicing one's piety in private with the act of getting ashes on one's forehead and then leaving church for all the world to see. It seemed hypocritical. There was a woman at a former parish of mine who couldn't wait until the end of the Ash Wednesday service to get to the bathroom and wash the ashes off her forehead. I used to think she failed to grasp the significance of the day – the meaning of the ashes, the sign of penitence, the recognition of our mortality. But now I think perhaps she was trying to follow the Gospel. She was trying to be seen only by her Father in heaven. She did not want to be thought a hypocrite. When I realised that Jesus is talking about motivation for our conduct, I ceased to think there was an issue of hypocrisy. I understood, instead, that Jesus is encouraging us to respond to God in a sincere way that identifies ourselves with God's purposes.

I also came to realise that we are always wearing the mark of a cross on our foreheads. At our baptism, a priest traces the cross of Christ on our foreheads and

we thereby are marked as Christ's own forever. Whether or not anyone else sees the trace of that cross made at our baptism depends on how we live our life. When we receive the mark of the cross in ashes on our forehead once a year, there is no hypocrisy; in fact, it's just the opposite of hypocrisy – it's an act of integrity, for it shows our intention to live into the vows that were made at our baptism, or the vows that we would make in undertaking an adult profession of faith to follow Jesus as Christ and Lord.

When we receive a cross of ashes marked on our forehead, it is not a show for others but a reminder for ourselves, a reminder of the cross of Christ indelibly etched on our forehead. When we hear the words, "Remember that thou art dust, and unto dust shalt thou return," it's not to receive the praise of others, but to receive a wake-up call for ourselves. We are mortal. We don't have much time left. Are we storing up treasures on earth or are we building up treasures in heaven? How are we living into our baptismal vows to follow Jesus as Christ and Lord? We have the full 40 days of Lent to explore these questions.

Some people use the 40 days of Lent to examine themselves – sort of an annual spiritual check-up, much like one would get a physical check-up. Listen to this story of one person who underwent an annual Lenten spiritual examination:

"I went to the Lord's clinic to have my routine check-up and I confirmed I was ill. When Jesus took my blood pressure, he saw I was low in tenderness. When he read my temperature, the thermometer registered 40 degrees of anxiety. He ran an electrocardiogram and found that I needed several 'love bypasses' since my arteries were blocked with loneliness and couldn't provide for an empty heart. I went to orthopaedics because I couldn't walk by my brother's side and I couldn't hug my friends since I had fractured myself when tripping with envy. He also found I was

short-sighted, since I couldn't see beyond the shortcomings of my brothers and sisters. When I complained about deafness, the diagnosis was that I had stopped listening to Jesus' voice talking to me on a daily basis.

“For all of that, Jesus gave me a free consultation thanks to his mercifulness, so once I leave this clinic my pledge is to only take the natural remedies he prescribed through his words of truth: every morning take a full glass of gratitude, when getting to work take one spoon of peace, every hour take one pill of patience, one cup of brotherhood and one glass of humility, when getting home take one dose of love, and when going to bed take two caplets of clear conscience.”

What will your spiritual check-up tell you this Lent? Amen.