

# PERFORMING FOR THE RIGHT AUDIENCE

## 2016 Ash Wednesday Meditation

### Text: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

**People have an idea that the preacher is an actor on a stage and they are the critics, blaming or praising him. What they don't know is that they are the actors on the stage; he (the preacher) is merely the prompter standing in the wings, reminding them of their lost lines. ~Soren Kierkegaard**

(The above quote was edited out of the sermon due to time constraints, but I decided to leave it here in the printed version. Kierkegaard is not so much "defending" the pastor ... and/or seeking to save him from the dual perils of undue criticism or undue adulation ... as he is reminding ALL Christians that we are performers on the stage of this world, and our primary audience is an audience of One. The church might be likened to the "wings" of the stage where we are all given cues and reminders and promptings regarding how we are to "act" in the presence of God as we live out our lives.)

Jesus reiterates for us in tonight's Gospel text that we perform before a divine audience of One. Some of you may remember this, but one ancient Greek word for an actor playing a role on the stage was the term "hupokrites," one who puts on a performance before people. That's where we get the word "hypocrite" ... one who is play-acting before others. Three classic Lenten disciplines are mentioned by Jesus in tonight's Gospel reading, disciplines Jesus underscores are best carried out before the divine audience, the One who sees everything, and not "hupokritically" acted out to impress others. Prayer, Fasting, Works of Love. We tend to think of "giving up" or "stop doing" something for Lent, however, these particular disciplines mentioned by Jesus are not so much about "giving up" or "stop doing" as they are about proactively *giving* or *doing*. Instead of deciding what I might want to give up and/or stop doing for Lent, I'd like to think of what I might make a special effort to GIVE or DO for Lent ... something proactive, something productive ... to honor our Lord Who gave (*and gave up*) so much for us!

The first discipline Jesus mentions is intentional, but hidden, acts of love and charity. This can be a most enjoyable Lenten discipline ... a discipline, by the way, that certainly can be practiced year round ... to engage in intentional, but "hidden" (*or anonymous, or secret, or covert*) acts of love and charity. During Lent, I encourage you to look for ways you can give to someone in need in a way he/she will not know it is you doing the giving. Take the lousy parking space, leaving the empty space nearer to the church or the store for someone else. Put away the shopping carriages strewn all over the grocery store parking lot, and save someone the exasperation of having their car dinged by a stray carriage or a parking space blocked by the carriage of some lazy, careless shopper that didn't take the little time or effort to simply put the thing away her/him self (*as you may have discerned, this is a pet peeve of mine!*). Clear the snow from someone's driveway. Put money in an envelope and send it with no return address to someone you know who could use it. Be creative; use your imagination! I encourage all of us to determine to do at least one anonymous act of care, concern and/or charity each day; to do something each day to, as Jimmy Durante sang years ago, "*Make someone happy, Make just one someone happy.*" And as that old song ends, you'll find "*And you will be happy, too.*" Be sure to keep it secret and anonymous, and I guarantee you'll see how fun it can be! And you might also get just a small taste of inexplicably divine satisfaction, because you will be imitating the God who anonymously blesses us time and again throughout the course of our days. Jesus intimates that God reserves a special blessing for those who do such things knowing He is the only "audience." In our acts of love don't be like the hen cackling when she lays an egg, as if to proclaim to any who would hear, "*Hey, look what a good thing I did! Cluck, cluck, bwalk!*" Quiet down. You're a hen; you're supposed to do that! We are Christians; we are supposed to do loving and charitable things!

The second discipline mentioned is prayer. The traditional symbol for Lenten prayer is the pretzel. During Lent, early Christians made dough of flour, salt and water; they then shaped that dough in the form of two crossed arms, an ancient posture for prayer, to remind themselves to pray. Private prayer is conscious, deliberate time spent with God, which may or may not include actual spoken words. One side benefit is that the more time we consciously place ourselves in God's presence, the more we begin to take on dimensions of God's character. The Holy Presence can act like something of a divine Swiffer Dust magnet, just lifting the "dirt" out of our lives as we intentionally draw near to Him. We often

unconsciously take on characteristics of those we spend time with, which can work for ill and good! I invite you to observe Lent with conscious and deliberate prayer each morning and evening, spending deliberate time in the presence of God. It need not be long; simply intentional. If this is new to you, I recommend using a book or prayers or a devotional booklet to help get you started.

Fasting is the third traditional Lenten discipline mentioned by Jesus here in Matthew. Of the three disciplines mentioned, this one seems most associated with "Giving Up," but doesn't have to be; it can have a positive thrust with profound benefits. Fasting is an intentional way to proactively exercise control, *self* control, over basic appetites, which has the positive benefit of helping build self-discipline which better equips you to say "NO" to more weighty situations. John Wesley so believed in fasting that I'm told he would not ordain anyone to the Methodist ministry unless they routinely fasted Wednesdays and Fridays ... I'm sure many Methodist pastors are glad this has been dropped from the requirements! But in fasting, whether it is abstaining from one particular food or from ALL food for a time, we exercise and develop our God-given ability to say "NO." And we become better equipped and conditioned for the more difficult battles of destructive temptation life will bring our way. By saying "NO" to something as "alluring" as, say, a cheese Danish, we strengthen our ability to say "NO" to anything more powerfully alluring that might control us and/or do us harm. Fasting has also been found to be physically as well as spiritually beneficial, as it cleanses the system, clears the mind, strengthens the will and refreshes the spirit. It also frees up our time! One thing that always impresses me during a period of fasting is realizing just how much I do is driven by consuming and/or satisfying appetites; how much time is taken up with consuming, thinking about consuming, planning for consuming, or recovering from consuming. As those who have practiced fasting will affirm; after getting over the initial hurdle of resisting, say, the first two meals, many attest to a rush of energy and clarity of mind and a fuller sense of spirituality. I know not everyone can fast, due to medical conditions and/bodily limitations. However, many of us can and have just never tried; I encourage you to think about practicing this Lenten discipline in some form or another this season.

Jesus says in verse 16: *"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show they are fasting ... but when you fast put oil on your head and wash your face so that it won't be obvious that you are fasting."* In churches today, ashes are imposed and these words are spoken, *"From dust you have come and to dust you shall return."* Ashes are a symbol of dust; there is a bit of a play on words in the Hebrew vocabulary here: roughly transliterated, Dust is *Aphar*, and Ashes is *Ephar*. (*"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust..." is much more poetic in Hebrew.*) I've gone back and forth on this over the years, trying to rectify the propriety of what is a public display of piety with what appears to Jesus' very strong admonition against it. Jesus says to the faster, *"Wash your face!"*, and here we are in church liturgically *dirtying* our faces on Ash Wednesday. This seems disturbingly like the public "disfiguring of the face" Jesus specifically tells us NOT to display.

Two things, though: (1) Jesus' words about piety in private are misinterpreted if they are used to suggest piety *must* not be public. Where else should you and I live out our piety but in public? If we are not publicly displaying our sincere piety then I would say something is wrong with our piety! I believe Jesus' point is simply one of motivation. Are we "play acting" for the human audience around us, or are our actions truly borne of our love for God? I'm certainly convinced it is OK to bear public witness to our faith through discreet and tasteful outward adornment, be it on our clothing, jewelry, or faces ... symbols of our piety. (2) However, an alternative option we've offered here the past three years may help better balance private piety and public propriety: In light of Jesus' imperative for proactive, but hidden, acts of spiritual discipline, those who desire ashes may have them imposed on your hand of action, as a discretely hidden reminder to you that Lenten disciplines are proactive; they are as much about DOING as they are about sacrifice. Or, you may opt for the traditional forehead imposition, which will be offered as well. If you choose to come forward, just indicate to me your preference by either holding out your hand or stand with arms at your side.

The phrase *"From dust you have come and to dust you shall return"* goes all the way back to Genesis 3. There God reminds the man and the woman of one somber consequence of their sin: the fact that some day they will die, *"... to dust you shall return."* The Tempter promised them they would not die, but as we know, he was a lying snake. Death is now part of life. Apart from the grace of God, at death you and I would return to the elements. But as we will celebrate at the end of this season on Easter, death is not the final end. After all, the ashes imposed are not merely dirty smudges of dust and death. They also form the sign of the cross.

*"Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory over death through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 15:57)*