

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Jesus said, "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. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever 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.

"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 by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

From Ashes to Resurrection - February 26, 2020

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Today we begin our special journey of forty days. In a few moments, we will have the opportunity to come forward and receive the imposition of ashes on our foreheads, reminding us that we indeed were created from dust and returning to dust is our inevitable fate. Don and I will intone the words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” A somber moment indeed!

However, these words reminding us that we are dust stand in stark contrast with the culmination of this period of time we call Lent. While today we remember our own mortality, at the end of this season is Easter, where we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! So over the course of these forty days, we move from the gloom and despair as symbolized by the Ashes to the unbounded hope and joy of knowing that while our physical bodies will be dust, we — the real we — the real human beings who live behind our flesh, do not return to dust at all, but are gloriously, wonderfully, marvelously resurrected with Christ! That is the foundation of our faith: Eternal Life is real. Resurrection is not a vain hope, but a stunning reality. I could not begin to explain the how of what happened on that Easter Sunday, but I can see, and you can see, that the Easter Event was so powerful that it literally when it happened two thousand years ago immediately changed the lives of hundreds of women and men. What you see around us today, the church, is the product of the resurrection. Two thousand years later, surviving endless attempts to destroy her, the church lives. If resurrection was just a mere fantasy, just wishful thinking on the part of Jesus’ friends, how could that have possibly inspired a movement that has endured for so long?

Traditionally, the “Ash” part of Ash Wednesday has been used to put the us into a time of self abasement. We have been encouraged to give up material pleasures and think sacrificial thoughts. We are encouraged to reflect on our lives and find something, even many things, to repent for and vow not to repeat. In short, we have typically portrayed Ash Wednesday as 40 days of gloom, only to be ended by the incredible, inexplicable resurrection of Jesus. We go from 40 days of gloom to an amazing day of warmth and sunshine — just like that!

That’s why today’s scripture seems somehow out of place. Jesus is teaching during what we call his “Sermon on the Mount,” and he is commenting on how many of the people in his day behaved during the ritual of fasting, as well as the practices of giving alms and praying. Apparently when people were moved to give to the poor, pray to God, and engage in fasting, many made a big show of it. They made sure that everyone knew that they gave. They made their prayers public, loud, and

long. When they fasted, they looked as though they were suffering more than it was possible for any human to endure.

It seems to me that the way people proclaimed their relationship with God and the sacrifices they were making for God back then was not too different from the sacrificial, self-denying way we've been told to practice Lent today. Suffer, suffer, suffer. Make it hurt. Give up something dear to you. Reflect on your many, many sins. Feel bad now so the Easter event will make you feel good.

Yet, curiously, Jesus does not praise the people who called attention to themselves and let the world know what they were up to. Rather, Jesus praised the people who gave to the poor, prayed to God, and fasted — but did not let anybody know about it! He told us instead to oil our hair and wash our faces and be glad.

And why not? Why should we not be glad? Why should we not be celebrating this time of Lent rather than suffering through it? After all, the fact that we are able to give to the poor and other charities means that we actually have the money, time, and ability to do so. Isn't that something to celebrate? The fact that we can pray to God means that we have a God to pray to — a God who loves us and listens to us and yes, responds to us always. And finally, when we do fast, when we do make sacrifices of any kind, doesn't that mean that our hearts, our minds, and our spirits are able to do so and thereby able to bring us closer to God. Isn't that also worth celebrating?

I'm wondering if instead of seeing these 40 days as a time of sacrifice and woe, we should look at them just as a child counts down to Christmas. Yes, we know that for children, Christmas is the biggest holiday of the year. They get their toys, they see their relatives, they get a break from school.

But for adult Christians, Easter should be the biggest holiday of the year. Easter is the day we celebrate the vindication of all Jesus did on earth — all that he preached, all that he taught, and everyone that he healed. Through the power of Almighty God, the resurrection we celebrate on Easter proves that Jesus wasn't just a wise man with many nice things to say, but truly the Son of the Living God, our Savior, and our Hope for Humanity.

With that in mind, therefore, with our seeing Lent as a joyous countdown instead of time of gloom and beating ourselves up, how should we celebrate these forty days?

Well, let us be clear, Lent has been and should continue to be a time of self-examination and reflection. I hope we all can admit, especially myself, that we do not take nearly enough time in our lives to pray, reflect, and meditate on our lives and our journey with Our Lord. It is so easy to simply

repeat the same old, same old, without doing the sometimes hard work of deliberately breaking away from our routines and instead making ourselves listen regularly for that still, small voice of God who will love us into an ever better life. No, we should use this time to read scripture, get away and think, and interact with fellow Christians not about whether the gas bill has been paid but how our church is exemplifying what it means to be entrusted with spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That is a part of Lent that is indispensable.

But at the same time, while we are reflecting on ourselves, should we not also be anticipating the Best News of All that comes on Easter? I mean, if all we are doing is spending our days mired in the ashes and soot of our lives, how can we possibly extract ourselves suddenly to celebrate the resurrection? Traditionally, it seems like we are somehow supposed to flip a light switch and transform from being pensive to being joyful.

What I propose during this season of Lent is to celebrate how God has taken us creatures of dust and transformed us into the dearly beloved, special human beings that we are! We have every reason to smile and delight in what God has done for us, no matter what is going on in our lives, starting with celebrating the fact that we are alive. Start with that, friends, start with that. Lent can be a time not of reminding ourselves of our sins and faults — of which there are certainly many — but rather, Lent can be a time of reminding ourselves daily of how blessed we are that God is in our lives and Jesus is our Savior. We can remember that no matter how bad things get — and yes, they can be terribly bad — we are not alone. Jesus Christ, who was human like us, who knows the horrors of our lives, who experienced first hand what it was like to be abandoned and rejected, Jesus sits beside us when our lives turn to ashes. He prays alongside us when all we can grasp is the dust of shattered promises, hopes, and dreams. Jesus is there to remind us daily that resurrection is what happens just when we think we have lost everything — but realize that instead of losing everything, our lives are reborn. Yes, they will not be the same as before. They will certainly be different. But, when we choose to look at ourselves, and our lives, and the world in new, fresh ways, we will realize that our lives reborn in Jesus are supremely different and supremely better than anything we have known before.

That is what Lent is for. To remind us that from the ashes of despair new hopes and new dreams are not only possible, but regularly happen. Let us use this Lenten season not to tear ourselves down, but to build ourselves up. To restore confidence in our calls to be followers of Jesus Christ, to move forward boldly when the conventional wisdom tells us to shut down, to know that through faith our lives are unstoppable, wonderful, and miraculous.

Take these ashes tonight and with the help of God use them to reform and restore your relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Then emerge, on Easter Sunday, renewed, refreshed, and revitalized to be Christ's true disciples as together we spread the Good News of Jesus in our hurling world.

May you have a blessed and restorative Lent!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.