

February 14, 2018
Ash Wednesday/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year B
Primary Text: Mark 6:1-21
Sermon Title: “*On the Disciplines of Lent*”

Theme

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commends almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, but emphasizes that spiritual devotion must not be done for show.

Text

[Jesus said to the disciples:] 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. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so 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. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But 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.

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. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so 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.

¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Sermon

I cannot resist the uniqueness of this day. On the liturgical calendar, it is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. A day that starts a penitential season for Christians. It is often celebrated with special pietistic spiritual disciplines.

For example, some give something up for Lent – we call it fasting. If you are going to fast something for Lent, I hope it is not trivial – “I’m giving up caffeine, or soda, or chocolate.” Unless you are really addicted to those things, I personally don’t see that as a great fast. You may want to argue with me, but I can’t see how giving up a \$4 cup a coffee a day will please the LORD, unless of course, you turn around and give that \$4 to help reduce hunger or homelessness or something like that.

Fast from something like TV, newspaper, or some other time-consuming habit and apply that time to take on or increase your devotions or bible reading or work in some kind of Christian ministry, now you are pleasing God.

But there is another reason this day is unique and that is because it is Valentine’s Day. Happy Valentine’s Day to all of you. It’s not really fair that Valentine’s Day is Ash Wednesday, but then do you really need a special day to tell your loved ones that you love them?

Allow me to take Valentine’s Day a different direction for you. As much as you love your significant other, God revealed in Jesus Christ loves you more. As I tell the kids each Sunday, God loves us so much that he couldn’t bear to go through eternity without us, so he sent Jesus to show us how to live godly lives.

Long ago his own people rejected him as Lord of their lives and so he was crucified until dead and buried. We would have done the same, so mired in sin are we. But even our rejection of him as Lord and our repeated failure to live up to his standard cannot prevent the salvation that God wills. All it takes is to say “I’m sorry.” To repent from our evil ways and start afresh.

In 1970 there was a blockbuster hit called Love Story and in it there is a tragic catchphrase that many of you will remember, ““Love means never having to say you're sorry.” That is so wrong and I hope you all know it.

In your marriage, love means having to say you’re sorry.

In your relationship with your children and parents, love means having to say you're sorry.

In your friendships, love means having to say you're sorry.

In your relationship with God revealed in Jesus Christ, love means having to say you're sorry too.

Saying you're sorry in any of your relationships may just repair that which is tearing it apart. And I know saying you're sorry will repair your relationship with God.

Penitential acts and spiritual disciplines during Lent and all year around for that matter are signs, manifestations of your devotion to Jesus Christ who gave his life so that you might live with him in eternity.

Let us take advantage of this blessed season of Lent to return to the Lord; repent of all that separates us from God, and be drawn in closer to him by the Spirit's tether.