Ash Wed 2024 Matt 6: 1-6, 6-10

Our gospel for tonight, at first, seemed a little out of place. with all of the concern about how we pray, fast, and give money. And what about the Ashes? Do they fly in the face of this teaching?

But then I realized that it is a good lesson for this night – a good start to ask why we do the things we do day to day? And then Jesus warns us as we examine our actions to be always aware of the ease that we can slip into hypocrisy.

We daily need to ask, Is God the central reason and purpose for all our actions? And do we care for our neighbors as much as we care for ourselves.. always busy gathering money and property so that we may be comfortable and secure. Oh yes, even while we are giving money, being on committees, leading different groups… Why are we doing all these things. Really?

Is it our congregation challenge to Go in Peace and Serve the Lord ? Or is it more so that others will know you, know your name, your church’s name, know your works, know your kids so that you can have a slight advantage or the edge when it comes to invitations, nominations, awards. ..rather than it is our calling to bear good fruit for the Lord.

Luther tells a story to explain how all our actions can be done in love and at the same time quite self-serving… He was taking apples from their orchard down to a needy widow with many children. He knew they could use them. (Then the shift. – wait for it…) He thought how they would appreciate them… How nice it was for him to do that… hypocrisy slides right in. We’re caught aren’t we with one foot in the world and the other foot trying to get a toe hold in the Kingdom.

Yes, we do live in the world- the finite world. The world formed from dust. And to dust it will all return. But we are simultaneously and eternally the children of God. Dust is not our final destination. Lent is a gift for us. A time for us to remember our Father’s words: the primary commandments of – loving God with our hearts minds and souls, having no other gods before Me… so we must reclaim the parts of us that we have given up to the world, its idols, its attention… and to realign our efforts to true service of the Lord and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Lent is our chance in turning, or returning, our attention to God. And here’s the thing, God is always, always, always turning His attention toward the world. God so loves this world that God would die for this world. And so, in Lent, we turn our attention to God and when we turn toward God, we must also turn to the world that God loves so much. Not to impress, but to love.

To fall in love with the world. To believe and trust that God is hidden within the world. That all the people here tonight are made in the image of God. And to have faith that in the faces of family and friends and strangers, in those faces is hidden the image of God. It is there. That is the promise. Now our job is to go and find it. To search and to search until we see the face of God in one another.

Today’s gospel isn’t as much about piety, alms giving, prayer, and fasting, as it is the motivation behind those things: our need and desire to be seen, praised, and recognized by others; the temptation to value the rewards of others over the rewards of God; and the ways in which we over invest ourselves in the illusion of what others can give us.

It’s not only about practices of piety, it’s also about how we live our life. The season of Lent and the Ashes on our foreheads are needed reminders. It’s a question of finding ourselves. Knowing our time in the world is limited – finite. Knowing that the work we must be about IS the work of God. Not one more Bulleted Accolade on our resume or accomplishment on our bucket list.

The good news of today is not about **How** To fix our weakness and limitedness or hypocrisy so much as it is about the holiness of ashes. We are certainly dust and to dust we shall return, but our bodies, these dust particles held together by the breath of God, are His people, created in his image. Our Gospel here on the first day of Lent reminds us to thirst for His righteousness - to be about his work – Here in the worldly, made of dust kingdom even as we keep a toehold in the next – not doing it for our glory but for the glory of the one who made us. Amen.

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