

Sermon for Ash Wednesday
Wednesday, February 22, 2023
“Pray, Fast, & Give”

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

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I know how much fun we had last night for Shrove Tuesday or Mardi Gras, but now we have entered the penitential season of Lent. But, before I spend time talking about *what* we are supposed to do in Lent, I would like to start by addressing *why*. I was talking to a friend recently, a friend who happens to be non-Christian. And he was asking me about my practice, especially during Lent. We've been friends for a long time, so we've had lots of discussions about religion and the Bible, and he asked me why I fast and do other devotions during Lent (which I almost never break, BTW), but seem not to follow other passages or sections of the Bible, like various commandments. Or why I can eat pork, when it says in the Old Testament not to. Well, I had to explain how in our tradition and expression of Christianity (Anglicanism, in particular) we read scripture with an openness to being critical of the text; we do not read the Bible literally, like a cookbook, but literarily, recognizing the differences between the times in which it was written and our own, or who wrote it and ourselves.

But as I started thinking about my own devotional practice and such and why I do what I do, I realized that these practices are not really necessary. Let me explain. God will be God whether we do these things or not. And God will be faithful, loving, and merciful to us, whether we fast during Lent or not. Our devotion for the sake of devotion isn't the point. That's what Jesus was trying to explain to the Pharisees and other important religious figures of his time, because they tended to follow the rules, practices, and traditions, for the sake of following the rules, practices and traditions. Rather, we practice these devotions, we fast and abstain during Lent in order to focus our attention back toward God, because we are easily distracted by worldly concerns away from him.

Jesus reminded us in the Gospel reading of the need for praying, fasting, and almsgiving. Now this isn't the order in which Jesus listed them in his discourse that comes from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus wasn't referring to a penitential season; he was preaching a sermon on righteousness: how to behave, how best to live in order to enter the kingdom of God, how humans can be in right relationship with God. Jesus was pointing out some of the practices done by religious folk, which had for the most part degenerated into insincere, public gestures of piety meant to convey the message, “Look how good and pious I am,” rather than being acts of real conviction and faith in God. As modern Christians, the Church's wisdom as we have received it in the lectionary, we use this portion of the Sermon on the Mount to focus our attention on what Lent is supposed to be about, not simply why we do Lent, but more importantly, what we are to do *with* Lent, *in* Lent, and potentially after Lent.

First, we are to pray. The forty-day season of Lent draws us back to the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness right after his baptism and just prior to the beginning of his adult ministry. You remember what happened to him while he was there; he was tempted by Satan, the devil, a conflicted mind, whatever. Nonetheless, Jesus struggled for forty days as he prepared for the great task he was about to take on of preaching, teaching, healing, and confronting the religious status quo. During that period, he prayed. Prayer was central to his dealing with that struggle. Prayer helps us deal with our own struggles. The “religious” people in Jesus’s time prayed so as to draw attention to themselves, but in our own time we seem to do the opposite. We hardly want people to know that we “go to church” or “believe in God.” Younger generations these days identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” It’s like we’re afraid to show off our faith. We don’t take enough time for God or our relationship to him, and we spend even less time showing the world that our experience of God matters. See, that’s the key. If we’re trying to show how much better we are than someone else, then we’re like the hypocrites Jesus was talking about, but what we should be doing is sharing how we experience God in our personal lives. The simplest way to do that is to say grace before we eat. Let people see us stop and make space for God. That’s not boasting; that’s being faithful, true, and honest about who we are and what God means to us. Making space for God should be a natural part of who we are and what we do. Prayer should mark the beginning and end of your day, you should say grace at each meal, and you should be praying at other various times during the day. If you look in the Prayer Book between pages 136 and 140, you will find four opportunities for daily individual devotions.

During Lent, we also fast. The scriptural connection is, of course, that Jesus fasted while in the wilderness. Fasting was an important practice in the ancient world. It added a physical, bodily aspect to spiritual practice. When Jesus fasted, he was tempted to change stones into bread. He could have, but if he had, he would be taking matters into his own hands. Fasting reminds us that we depend on God for what we have, not on our own devices. In addition to fasting, we abstain from certain foods on certain days. Fasting and abstinence call us to self-discipline, chastity, and restraint; less focus on the self and our own desires, but on the will of God and the needs of others. There are some guidelines in your Sunday bulletins and in this week’s e-newsletter.

That leads into the third focus that Jesus mentions that we reflect on during Lent. That is almsgiving. It’s not so much about giving real money to the needy, although that is part of it, but rather, thinking less about self and more about others—living in relationship with one another. Lately, we have seen too much of our society that seems to focus on the individual—what I want, what I need, what helps me. We don’t want to do for others or give to others. And I’m not talking about in our families, I’m talking about society in general. And as a nation, we have become very selfish. We don’t want to pay for everyone to have health care. We don’t want to support all of our schools being well-funded, especially city public schools. We don’t want certain kind of low-

income housing in our neighborhoods. I hear people talking about putting America first; we want to prioritize our citizens—nothing wrong with that—but many want to do it to the exclusion of everyone else. We have been forgetting about our responsibilities as citizens of the world, and we have forgotten that we are our sisters' and brothers' keeper. When we give of ourselves, when we lift up someone else, we show love like the kind of love God has. Public contributions are ok too, as long as they are given in love, charity, and willingness, not just to get your name on a plaque or at the top of a building. Well, that probably doesn't apply to most of us here, but you can take any money you save from whatever you have given up this Lenten season, and give it away. A practical and more tangible way to give alms during this season.

There is a saying, "You can't take it with you." At some point we are all going to die, because we're mortal. We receive ashes on the forehead to remind us that we are all dust, and to dust we shall return. That's why our relationship with God is so important, because this mortal body will deteriorate, die, and decay, but our soul will go on for ever. We need to be prepared. Amen.