

Ash Wednesday 2023

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

“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.

“Love people use things because the other way around never works” applies to Jesus’ warnings about bad religion...More precisely, mis-using religion and religious practices to promote ourselves and worse to oppress others.

Jesus lifts up three traditional spiritual practices that have fallen prey to being “used” by some religious folk for show; namely prayer, fasting and charity. These practices are meant for the sake of others and for our relationship with God...and salty beatitudes people are called to hold close to that intention.

The context of Jesus’ teaching about these religious practices matters- This teaching is part of what’s known as the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus teaches the crowds about living peacefully in community. He’s casting a vision of a society that lives in contrast to life in the empire; a society that doesn’t govern by force or oppress the most vulnerable. This revolutionary society continues to practice the ancient traditions of doing justice, loving kindness and walking attentively with God.

We might find ourselves chuckling at the word pictures Jesus paints of people’s showy religious displays. Do we also see the dark underbelly? I come from a country where religious language and display have historically been used to justify slavery, the displacement and extermination of people, inhumane working conditions for children and immigrants and even bombing other countries. Even today, national prayer breakfasts among law makers don’t translate into poor people having clean drinking water, health care, education, or food. Heaven help us when authority figures spout off after a mass shooting by offering thoughts and prayers while opposing any real solutions.

At the heart of our religious practice is— er, well umm, the heart. People in Jesus’ time and in the time of the prophets regarded the heart as the centre

of our choices, intentions and conscious actions....emotions were thought to live in the gut.

The prophet Joel calls to dissect our motives, our choices, and our volition. Such dissection means more than an outward show of tearing our garments or even putting ash on our foreheads! Another prophet Jeremiah warns that our hearts can deceive us, so off the rails we go thinking we can DIY our way into God's favour and God's realm.

The prophet Ezekiel has the Lord promising a heart transplant for people...removing a lump of rock and replacing it with flesh of compassion and justice and right relations with our neighbour.

These prophets might well come to mind when we regard Jesus' words that conclude today's Gospel; "Where your treasure is found, that's where your heart lives also."

It's worth repeating something we shared a year ago on Ash Wednesday—that God's heart steadfastly yearns and chooses, beating for our sake and for the restoration of all things. May God's passionate and compassionate centre shape our own prayers, fasting, and charity .