

## **“An Outward Sign of an Inward Journey”**

Joel 2:1-2; 12-17

Psalm 51:1-17

Matthew 6:1-6; 16-21

For Joint Service for Ash Wednesday at St. Francis Roman Catholic Church

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When I was in grade school New Jersey, just outside of New York City, I remember all the Roman Catholic children coming into school with the sign of the cross on their foreheads. I remember feeling that this was something that we Protestant kids would feel a bit embarrassed about because we wouldn't dare have some smudge mark on our forehead. But then I also thought that it was rather cool that in the Catholic tradition you get to have some sort of sign or badge that identifies your faith. In fact, secretly as a Protestant kid I sort of wished that I were Roman Catholic so that I too could have a smudge mark on my forehead.

That feeling did not last too long because later in the afternoon, some of the Catholic kids told me that the Catholic School was hard because sister “so and so” use to rap their hands with a ruler, “That is why we are now in the public school.” I wasn't so sure that having a smudge mark on my forehead was worth getting rapped in the knuckles with a ruler and that sort of put on hold my secret desire to be a Roman Catholic. Not that the public school teachers were all that great all the time. I remember in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade that one of the teachers took my friend Alan in the hallway and knocked his head against another child's heads to get a confession. She got it. I was very happy at the end of the school year that I got a notice with my report card that I would not have that for the fourth grade. That was really the beginning of a sweet summer....knowing that I wouldn't have that teacher.

Today is Ash Wednesday, and pardon my grade school Protestant language, but we are about to get a smudge mark on the forehead, or more properly the sign of the cross. Today marks the beginning of Lent.

I have had a little more training in the ways of the Christian pilgrimage and the way of Jesus since grade school, but my basic understanding that we Protestants did not normally go for all these outward signs of religion was basically correct. We simply did not make it a part of our Protestant religious and spiritual practice back in the 1960's. Why? Well, because of some of the scripture passages that we have just read. The Prophet Joel from the Old Testament calls us “to rend our heart and not our garments.” The Psalmist, perhaps King David, in Psalm 51 prays, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me....The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” And then Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount here in chapter 6 emphasizes that we should not perform spiritual acts as an outward show, but rather we should do things secretly and quietly so that we can develop inward devotion that is focused on God. “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.”

Later after going through college and attending a Protestant seminary down the street and studying the writings of the Protestant Reformers such as Luther and Calvin, it

was some of the texts that we have just read that were used as justification for keeping worship very plain and simple, avoiding ceremony and pageantry, and getting rid of kneeling for prayer, adoration of the cross, and yes getting rid of ashes on the forehead and the practice of Ash Wednesday.

Well, worshiping here today, we are both Roman Catholic and Protestant. And I think that we can both agree that reducing Ash Wednesday to only an external act of a sign of the cross on the forehead is not going to do us much good in terms of our spiritual devotion, our relationship with God, or the love of our neighbor. Mere perfunctory acts of religious devotion without a cleansing of the inner heart or praying for the deep inner renewal of the heart does not do God much good or ourselves as a disciple of Jesus much good. If receive the ashes in the form of the cross as a way of making ourselves look pious and religious to all of our friends, neighbors, and work colleagues back at the factory, the school, the office, then we might as well not come forward.

*We need to rend our heart and not our garment.*

*We need to pray that God can create a clean heart in us.*

Of course, the Roman Catholic practice of ashes or kneeling for prayer or crossing the heart can also be matched by historically typical Protestant religious acts such as Bible reading or legalistic Sunday observance. If these are done in a perfunctory manner or to gain the praise and attention of human beings or to flatter God, they are in Paul's words a noisy gong or a clanging symbol and they amount to absolutely nothing.

Jesus was very critical of the practice of religion by the religious leaders of his time, known as the Pharisees. Before they would give alms and put money in the money box at the temple in Jerusalem, they would announce this with a trumpet and fanfare. Or if the Pharisees would fast, they would make sure that they were having a bad hair day and look all tired and bedraggled to show everyone how religious they really were. Jesus calls this "Hypocrisy." It actually comes from the Greek word "*upokritai*," which literally means to "play act." It is drawn from the world of ancient theatre when an actor uses a mask. There is nothing wrong with that in a play or a drama with an actor, but it will not do when it comes to being a disciple of Jesus, because we pretend to be something that we aren't. We don't make a connection between our inner attitude and our outward action. We give our offering, pray, and fast, just to gain the applause of the crowd rather than focusing on God.

Outward signs of religion, whether it is the sign of the cross on Ash Wednesday, without an inner transformation of the heart is not the religion of Jesus. Jesus taught us that we could murder with the heart or we could commit adultery with the heart. It is not the food that we eat that corrupts but the attitude of the hearts by which evil and crimes originate. Our faith, our Christian faith, Roman Catholic or Protestant is a matter of the right attitude of the heart.

Some wonder whether there is a contradiction in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus says, "Beware of practicing your piety before others," and in chapter 5, Jesus says, "Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." In chapter 6, when we pray, fast, and give alms, we are to do in secret before God, but in chapter five as we practice good works our light is to shine before others. But there is not a contradiction, really. If we are tempted to give

offerings, pray, and fast to put on a show before human beings, then we are to work on much more of an inner spirit before God. But if we are afraid of human beings and lacking in courage because of persecution, then we are to continue our visible acts of service. Or as A.B. Bruce once put it, "Show when tempted to hide, and hide when tempted to show."

So our inner attitude and the purity of heart are very important when we practice our spirituality. Without an inner attitude, spirituality is not spirituality at all. Coming forward to receive ashes will be reduced to nothing more than the chemical compositions of the ashes. So let us first examine ourselves, cleanse our hearts and our thoughts, before coming into the presence of God.

But we are not quite done yet with the message of our scripture texts, and it is here that the Roman Catholic tradition with its historic rituals can contribute in a great way to our spirituality. It can also work the other way. Outward religious acts with a cleansing of the heart yields nothing, but outward acts can lead to an inner transformation.

Some would stand Jesus on his head and suggest that Jesus is against offerings, prayers, and fasting. But Jesus does not say if you give an offering, or if you pray, or if you fast. He says in the text when you give alms...when you are praying...when you fast. Jesus assumed that his disciples, then and today would give offerings, pray, and fast. In Matthew 9, critics asked Jesus, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?" Jesus answered that this was only a temporary period of time while the bridegroom (Jesus) was present with the disciples, but Jesus assumed after his departure that the disciples would fast.

Spirituality, drawing closer to Jesus Christ, requires not only inward disciplines but also outward disciplines of the Christian life. We need in drawing closer to God the discipline of corporate worship on Sunday; we need regular participation at the Table of the Lord; we need the act of prayer and fasting and the giving of offerings. We need the regular reading of the scriptures and such sacred acts as receiving the ashes on Ash Wednesday. These acts of religious devotion and piety have a way of drawing us closer to the God that we know in Jesus Christ.

Perhaps there are some of us that are here this first day of Lent that do not have a strong inner sense of the presence of Jesus. Maybe there are some here because of great losses, the struggle with temptation that you do not feel strong enough to face the trials and tribulations of life. Come forward; receive the ashes and the outward act may help you to know that Jesus Christ walks with you in the lonesome valley of your life. The ashes can be an external sign of an inner journey. By the simple fact that you are feeling in the valley of depression and despair, it indicates that you are far from turning the faith of Jesus into a show, and rather Jesus wants to show himself to you in the deepest parts of your heart.

Sometimes I say to Hope College students in the throws of a liberal arts education and intellectual and spiritual wrestling when they don't think they can confess the creed, "Just say it anyway; the creed is bigger than your heart; it is the faith of the church. It will come to you eventually, but first just stand and say it."

Conclusion:

At the very end of Lent is Holy Saturday. They laid Jesus in the tomb. The women were there and they watched the placement of Jesus' body. Luke tells us that they left the tomb "and rested according to the commandment." By following the Sabbath commandment, by practicing external legal acts, the women encountered the risen Lord.

The outward sign of the ashes this Ash Wednesday is a means that we can come to an inner transformation of the heart as Jesus renews and cleanses our hearts. And so we come to receive ashes with the prayer of King David, "Create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me."