

Ash Wednesday  
Wicker Park Lutheran Church  
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March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Beware.

It's a word we would associate with entering a construction site, a warning we might heed from a mysterious character in a movie, or sign we might read and take quite seriously walking into an open field of lions.

Beware: defined as being cautious and alert to dangers, might not be a word we'd expect to hear in a worship service, but nonetheless it is a word that opens our Lenten season today. It is the first word out of Jesus' mouth in our gospel.

Beware.

Beware of practicing your piety before others *in order to be seen by them*.

What unfolds in this reading that we might be very familiar with, hearing it on Ash Wednesday from year to year, or maybe this is our first time being struck with Jesus' words—what follows Jesus' warning is a series of pious actions from which one should be on the lookout for.

Don't draw attention to your giving,

Don't make a show of your fasting,

Don't pray so as to give a performance on the street corners...

This isn't delivered in one of Jesus' famous parables, or stories with a meaning hidden among a storied or metaphorical illustration. It is, quite honestly, a pretty straightforward command from Jesus. Beware of piety that is done with intentions of gaining recognition from others.

Now, I don't know about you, but when I hear these types of passages, this passage in particular, it is very easy for me to think about whom this gospel reading is about, and usually it isn't about me. I can think of some other people, who I can easily point to as people for whom this really applies. I've seen people on the street corners praying with a microphone; I know people who make very public their gifts to charitable organizations, including the church; and I know I don't do *that*, so I'm good, right?

But I wonder if that tendency of externalizing sin, of finger pointing, of letting ourselves off the hook, isn't something to sit with this Ash Wednesday and throughout these 40 days of Lent.

Because in some way, we all fall victim to acting for the approval of others, right?

In this social media age, a time when everything you do, say, eat, or buy is up for public consumption, this is a real challenge. It feels good to get likes and comments, to have people recognize who you are and what you're doing. Doesn't it?

But the hunger for this recognition is the thing for which we hear a warning from Jesus.

Jesus isn't telling us not to pray, not to fast, not to give generously, but instead to check the spirit in which we do so.

Praying, fasting, giving... these are important spiritual practices that draw us closer to God and our neighbor, practices many of us may take on this season. But this first verse today gives us much needed context and a much needed challenge: Beware of practicing your piety before others *in order to be seen by them*.

Faith is inherently public, the promises we make in baptism have inherently public implications. Living to love and serve our neighbor isn't a private or secret affair. People are going to see us and perhaps even judge positively or negatively our actions. But, the important question we must ask in our lives of discipleship is for *whom are we acting?*

Are we acting for the love of God and neighbor or are we acting to gain the approval of others?

In these 40 days of Lent, we practice trusting not only that God sees us, but we also practice recognizing that apart from God, we can do nothing out of faith. Faith active in love is a gift from God, and as we wander through the wilderness of these 40 days, we experience a pilgrimage where we are reminded again and again of our dependency on God's grace in our lives.

In a few moments, you will be invited to come forward and receive the sign of the cross on your forehead, hearing the words, *Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return*.

From the earth, God formed us and gave us life, and when we die, it is to the earth to which we will return. It is a statement of vulnerability. This is the first of what we pray

together are many moments throughout this season where we embody a posture of humility to God's grace.

But as you enter these days, do beware. Beware of temptation to travel these 40 days alone. Travel through the Lenten wilderness in community. Not so that others may see you and applaud you, but so that you come to know your dependence on God through the hospitality of your neighbor. Come together often to pray, to fast, to give of your time and your possessions. Together, we discover our limitations as individuals, but we are also made aware of God's abundant grace and mercy again and again.