

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Every Ash Wednesday, we hear the same readings. While they've become familiar to me, this year, the readings from Isaiah and Matthew struck me more than ever before. You see, earlier today, Vicar Paisley and I stood outside in the cold and snow smearing ashes on people's foreheads at the Damen blue line stop while others watched. Tonight, we gathered and heard Jesus say, "Beware of practicing your piety before others..." Well, crap. What were we doing out there? Should you all really come forward in a few moments to have ashes placed on your forehead? And, who picked this darn reading for tonight anyway?

Well, before you rush out the door because the reading seems to challenge our gathering, let's look a bit deeper into the reading. Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others *in order to be seen by them.*" You see, Jesus was not speaking down towards our spiritual practices as being useless or ineffective, but rather, Jesus is speaking about our disposition when engaging in these actions. And, as Dr. David Lose notes, Jesus then discussed three of the most important religious practices found in Judaism at that time—namely, giving alms (that

is, contributing to those in need), prayer, and fasting. In each case, it is not the practice that is critiqued, but rather the goal of the practitioner.¹

And, we see this type of thing all the time in the world around us. We watch a politician serve the homeless a meal or read to children. We notice corporations with flashy volunteer programs and corporate social responsibility goals. And, if you're anything like me, you, yourself, might choose clothing or food types that seem to have a positive impact on the world. But, does that politician really want anything other than to be elected? Does that corporation truly care about anything other than quarterly earnings? Do we actually care about justice or do we just want to look woke?

“Beware of practicing piety before others in order to be seen by them.”

You see, the practices themselves aren't what deserves critique. After all, reading children books, setting corporate responsibility goals, and buying ethical goods are a respectable thing, and the same goes for almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Rather, from Jesus's perspective, the goal to be seen by one's peers is what bears caution in today's reading.

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=901

Throughout tonight's gospel, the term "seeing" and its derivatives take center stage by appearing more than a half dozen times. As Dr. Lose notes, to be seen is not simply to be noticed; to be seen means that you matter, you count, and you have your sense of self validated in the eyes of another. With that in mind, Jesus encourages us to stop allowing our actions to be dictated by another. For when we allow others to dictate what we do, then we allow the other to determine our validity and worth. When we begin to seek another's approval, we get trapped chasing a fickle reward that keeps us dependent on the whim and will of others.² Instead, Jesus encouraged us to seek the gaze of divine love. The gaze that reminds us that we are all children of God who are equally valuable and loved. The gaze that reveals the truth that all of our pursuits are most life-giving when directed towards loving God, loving our neighbor, and loving our self.

So, tonight, as we smear ash on our foreheads, we are reminded that we all came from the essential carbons of this earth and, so too, we will return to that elemental state. The same carbon that God breathed the breath of life into, and the same carbon that will release that breath when we die. It reminds us that all of us—the ones we see in this room, the ones we work for, and the ones we try to impress—are all mortal and finite. The cross

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=901

is a reminder that we have the opportunity to strive for justice for love's sake. That ash reminds us that we have the opportunity—individual and collectively—to confront the ways our unbridled excess has harmed world bringing death to our neighbor and our very selves. That ash reminds us that we—individual and collectively—have the opportunity to reflect on the ways that we have not valued God's divine love and life-giving spirit which has been given to all people without exception. That ash reminds us that we—individually and communally—are in bondage to systems that misuse human relationships, devalue humility, and privilege the few.

And, at the same exact time, that ash reminds us of the eternal cross marked with oil on our forehead in baptism. The cross that reminds us of the divine gaze of love, the cross that reminds us that we are loved, and the cross that reminds us that we don't need to have it all together—for, we are dust and to dust we shall return. Thanks be to God's gift that liberates us from the endless pursuit of the human gaze, so that we might turn towards acts of love in response to God's divine grace. Amen.