

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Jesus said, “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.” A key term here is “piety.” Which if we were translate it more literally, we’d get the term “righteousness.” Now, in Matthew’s gospel when we hear “righteousness” our alarm bells should be going off. Remember, Matthew writes to a primarily Jewish context where righteousness was vital to living in alignment with God’s will. Righteousness, at its essence, is right conduct and correct observance. In tonight’s reading Jesus used a few examples to contrast (a) the type of righteousness that is true and genuine with (b) the type of righteousness that is an act or hypocritical. He explained that true righteousness doesn’t seek to be praised after caring for another, that true righteousness does not need to be seen in prayer, and that true righteousness does not make a spectacle out of religious and spiritual practices. Rather, true righteousness restores a right relationship with God and others. In other words, imposter righteousness performs an act because of the benefits he/she/they will receive; true righteousness does it for the good of the cosmos.

As we begin the season of Lent, this is the journey before us. It’s the season where we strive to embody true righteousness. To do that, we gather on a later winter evening to begin with truth-telling. We begin with the stark reality that we are a blip on the time horizon of the universe. We acknowledge that we come from the dust of the universe that has been around for over 14 billion years. We acknowledge that our bodies will one day be void of the breath that is emblematic of life and that we will return to dust.

Some of us might see that truth-telling as depressing, but I find it much more inspiring and mystical. After all, if you are dust, or star dust, and I am made of the same, then we are truly of the same essence. That acknowledgement lets us confess the lies we are told. To confess the ways that we have tried to say that *your* dust is not *my* dust, and *our* dust is not the dust of *you all*. But what we name to be true on this day is that you are dust, I am dust, and we are all dust. We are the dust of our ancestors, the dust of our universe, and the dust of our God.

This acknowledgement is central to the Lenten season. For the divisions we see between nations and peoples, comes from the false belief that we are essentially different. That false belief has led to a war in Ukrainian. That false belief has led to the rejection of refugees and immigrants at our southern border. That false belief is what led officials to make accusations of child abuse against parents who love their trans- children. That false belief shows itself time and again when we ignore the realities of climate change, when we let personal comfort trump the protection of the most vulnerable, and when we look at how racism began. You see, the roots of this false belief are in our inability to internalize that we have the same essence. That is not to say that we don't have beautiful differences to be appreciated, but rather that at our core we are all dust.

This is no easy pursuit. It requires us to put aside those lenses that prevent us from seeing the fullness of God and others. That is why, we're challenging ourselves to do this work together. In the days ahead, we'll begin a Lenten journey that will seek to reveal the limitations of a patriarchal lens and how we might be opened to an integrated sense of how God and our neighbors are one with us. During our Lenten Project, we'll have the opportunity to put our money where our mouth is as we acknowledge that the financial gifts we have received are intended to be used for the good of all. We will be challenged and opened to the new ways God works through us.

So, friends, on this night I invite you to join me on this journey. To walk with me as we seek to align ourselves with God's true righteousness. To remind me and to allow me to remind you of the dusty cross on our foreheads. To recall that we are the same dust as all of creation, and that this dusty cross is in the same place where we were marked as God's beloved in baptism. For, we have a God who embodies the fullness of our interconnected essence. We have a God who is the totality of that dust and the fullness of all that is. Our God is the God of love that binds all things together. Amen.