

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 103

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Today we are marking the first day in the season of Lent. It is a season of self-reflection, of penitence, of contrition, and of repentance. Perhaps it wouldn't be a bad idea to remind ourselves of the words of the collect that we prayed just a few minutes ago. We addressed God by saying "You hate nothing that you have made." Let's just pause there for a moment and ponder that: "You hate nothing that you have made." It is so easy for us to slip into this season of Lent.....this season of self-examination.....and determine that we are worthless or at the very best fail to measure up to what's expected of us. Inside our own heads.....probably the single most private place in the world.....we can readily see all our flaws magnified a thousand times and our virtues shrink to practically nothing. Such an evaluation of self doesn't seem to be too foreign to any of us. It's always so much easier, so it seems, to believe the bad stuff than to believe the good stuff. And yet, being down on ourselves probably isn't what Lent is all about.

So, if Lent isn't about self-criticism, what is it about? As we enter this season of self-examination and repentance, how are we supposed to view ourselves? Like the season of Advent.....which is a season of preparation before Jesus is born.....Lent is a time to pause for a moment and take stock of where we are in our spiritual journey. It's also a time of preparation.....preparation for Jesus' entry into the world again, but not as a baby this time. Jesus enters this world again as a man resurrected from the dead.....and we need to get ready for that. Lent is a time to take an inventory of the spiritual gains we've made and to take an honest and hard look at where we still have some growing to do.....and taking an honest and hard look at ourselves is one of the hardest things in the world to do.

The Scripture lessons for this service focus on recognition. Are we getting credit for what we do to honor God? Are we doing the things we ought to do in order to honor God? Who knows what we are doing? Who sees what we are doing? The prophet Isaiah is more than a little upset about what he sees. He rales against the people by pointing out all of their hypocrisy. He sees them fasting and at the same time oppressing people. He sees them fasting and continuing to quarrel with others. Bowing your head and wearing sackcloth isn't what God had in mind when he asked for fasting! Doing good to others is what God requires. That's what God is looking for.

And in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul begs the believers there to be reconciled to God. He wants them to understand that through Jesus Christ we believers might become the righteousness of God. And he talks about all that he has endured in order to follow Christ.....all of the misunderstandings, the criticism, the physical hardship and yet in times of both good reputations and bad reputation of both honor among men and dishonor, Paul sees himself as having everything he needs through Christ Jesus. He's not worried about his reputation. He's not worried about how the world sees him. He's focused only on building his relationship with God through Jesus. And he implores us to do likewise.

So what does Jesus have to say about recognition and good reputation and honor among men? As it turns out, he has a lot to say about it. Jesus makes it very clear that the whole point of fasting and praying and almsgiving has nothing whatsoever to do with our standing among our fellow man, but has everything to do with our standing before God. Jesus doesn't question the actions themselves. These are long-held traditions in the Jewish faith. These three things.....fasting, prayer and almsgiving.....are part of what sets the people of Israel apart as the chosen people of God. This is what they do. And this is part and parcel of Jesus' life as well as he is a practicing Jew. It's not that it's bad that people know that you do these things. These are the things that good Jews do.....just as good Christians do them. The quarrel that Jesus has is not with the actions themselves, but with the motivations behind them. The same can be said for the long-held traditions of the Christian faith. It's not a question of whether or not we tithe. It's a question of why we do it. It's not a question of whether or not we gather with fellow believers in chosen body of Christ to worship on Sunday morning. It's a question of why we do it. It's not a matter of whether or not we are willing to prayer aloud at a gathering or if we withdraw to a quiet place, as Jesus so often did, in order to pray. It's a question of why we are doing it. Jesus isn't questioning the practices of believing Jews and he's not questioning the practices of believing Christians. He's questioning the motivations and that's worth looking at. Why do we do what we do? And how do we do it?

What the purpose of almsgiving anyway? In the time in which Jesus lived and within a hundred years after his earthly ministry ended, almsgiving was a way of leveling the playing field. It was the way that those with more resources.....even if they were somewhat meager.....could share with those who had even less so that all could have enough. It was something that was to be done without advertising or fanfare, but done quietly and discretely so that those who were the recipients would not be shamed or humiliated. This quiet way of sharing resources was a profound way to establish justice and to build community so that all had enough.

And what about praying? During Jesus' lifetime, he showed us and taught us how to prayer. There's no need to be ostentatious unless it is important to impress the human hearers of the

prayer. Jesus taught us a very simple prayer, addressed to God as our Father and asking in the most straightforward way for what we needed most. Jesus very often went off by himself to pray in private.....and we are never more vulnerable and more absolutely naked than when we turn to God in private prayer. God already knows us.....better than we know ourselves. He already knows we are hurt, or angry, or jealous, or greedy, or ambitious, or heartbroken. He knows exactly what's going on inside of us even if we are trying desperately to hide it from ourselves. This is the time.....in private prayer.....when we can afford to look at ourselves in the mirror because the one who's holding the mirror is the one who love us.....who created us.....and who does not hate anything that He created. We not only can't have secrets from God, but we don't need to have secrets from God. He already knows. And it is in 'coming clean' with God and being honest with God and ourselves in prayer that we draw into an even deeper relationship with God which is the very essence of the reason for prayer.....a deeper relationship with God. It's not about being impressive in front of others with our eloquence or turn of phrase, it is about drawing closer to God.

And what is the purpose of fasting? It could be several things. Depending on what constitutes our fast, it could be a reminder of how dependent we are on God for our daily bread; it could be a matter of giving up an activity that takes us away from God rather than bringing us closer; it could be about replacing a worthless timewasting (albeit fun!) activity with one that will help us focus on other areas of our life that might serve God better or help us to know more about God or help us to become more aware of God.

Jesus told us to be the salt of the earth. He told us to be the light of the world. He told us not to hide our lamp under a bushel but to light the house with it. Our task, is to figure out the difference between public hypocrisy that has private consequences and private piety that has public proclamation of the word of God. Through our private and ongoing prayers, God will help us figure it out!!

Thanks be to God.  
AMEN.