

“Off the Surface”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
Ash Wednesday – 6 March 2019
Isaiah 58:1-12; II Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10; Luke 6:1-6, 16-21

What will other people think? Much as some people try to deny it, that question ricochets through most our minds more than we’d like. There may be a few who really don’t care, like the rare person who reaches the heights of maturity and feels fully self-secure, or in a darker vein, people who are somewhere on the sociopathic spectrum, but to the vast majority of people, it matters. What will other people think? Sometimes, those thoughts aren’t even conscious. They motivate us from deep within, from ingrained habits and a desperate desire to belong, to fit in.

Now wondering what other people think isn’t necessarily a bad thing. We are created to live in community, so it’s healthy to give due consideration to how others view us. In fact, feedback from others, when constructive and lovingly given, helps us become better people. But it gets dangerous when we peg our identity and sense of self-worth on how others see us, or how we *think* they see us. Striving to please people in the hope of being accepted can lead to superficiality, loss of integrity, and idolatry. These three, like an unholy trinity, are interconnected, a vicious cycle that can tear a person apart.

When we focus solely on the surface of who we are, we neglect the depths of our souls, where wisdom and peace and purpose dwell. Lacking those three blessings, we twist in the wind of fickle opinion. We roll out façades, one custom-made for each set of expectations, that don’t reflect who we are deep down, and that causes us to lose integrity and waste a lot of energy just trying to keep it together. When obsess over what other people think, little time’s left to focus on

what God thinks, and when we don't give much regard for what God thinks, we commit idolatry by valuing something else more.

It's this dangerous, destructive dynamic that Isaiah and Jesus address. Read on the surface, we can find plenty in their words that makes what we're doing here seem wrong and ridiculous. How could any faithful disciple receive a smudge of ash on their forehead, when that practice seems to be rejected by God as useless, even wicked? But a superficial reading of scripture often leads us astray, and looking deeper we can see that the problem is less about the exterior signs of piety – though we need to be careful with those – and more about intention and motivation.

Jesus makes clear that the why is decisive. “Beware of practicing your piety before others *in order to be seen by them . . . so that [you] may be praised by others.*” Jesus attacked the attitude that what other people think matters the most. If we go from this place proud of our ashes, a religious showoff who aspires to receive admiration from others, we have completely missed the point of a ritual designed to humble us.

However, if we walk away with a feeling of dreadful awe at our fragile mortality and need for repentance, and if we wear our ashes as a symbol of our smallness compared with God's greatness, then we act with proper motive and intention, even though other people might think badly of us. Be ready to accept the weird looks or the ugly murmur. That little smudge of ash can peak a person's curiosity, opening a teachable moment when we can share our faith. It's happened to me several times.

Of course, Jesus counsels caution, because sometimes our motives are mixed. For instance, he encourages us to pray in secret, to stay silent when we give, and to conceal our fasting, including wearing ashes, just in case. On the whole, that's the way we need to lean, not

out of fear of ridicule, which too often motivates us to stay quiet about our faith, but for an entirely different reason that's very exciting.

If you follow Jesus, and this might come as a surprise, then you are a subversive revolutionary, a fifth columnist who works to undermine the world's status quo, one who works to resist and erode the evil powers of injustice and cruelty, and supplant them with the mercy of the Kingdom of God. If you follow Jesus, then your mission, if you choose to accept it, is like the French Resistance in World War II, minus the violence.

As God spoke through the prophet Isaiah, "Is not this the fast that I choose; to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free . . . ?" That was a revolutionary demand. People thought that outward shows of piety, like fasting and sacrifice, could please God, but what was happening on the surface didn't match what was underneath – the greed, the enmity and strife, the violence and exploitation. They lacked integrity, and their idol was success, defined by wealth.

God wanted a different kind of fasting, a different type of sacrifice. Instead of not eating, He wanted people to provide for those who weren't eating, not by choice but out of poverty. "Is not this the fast that I choose . . . to share your bread with the hungry." Instead of not eating food, God wanted them to stop swallowing the lies they were telling each other and themselves, and get real.

Don't feast on the lies. Fast from them. Empty yourself of pretending to fear God, of pretending to be humble and really get humble by obeying God's rule of merciful justice, which when practiced subverts human custom and rationality and transforms human justice into something unrecognizable, something holy.

Instead of being superficial, God wants his people to take that deep plunge into the divine mystery, no matter what anybody else thinks, because don't be deluded. When you take the time to seek the sacred, when you sacrifice that most precious and unrenewable of resources, time, to break through the surface and immerse yourself in the mystery of God, some people will think that you're weird. Or worse, they might realize what you're really up to, inciting a process of subversion that rebels against the forces that dominate this world.

But don't worry about what they think. Care about what God thinks, and all will be well, though it will be tough. Paul offers a long list of how rough it got for him. It took great endurance to move forward in ministry despite the beatings and imprisonments and riots and sleepless nights. People said all kinds of nasty things about him. "He's a fake, useless, pitiful."

Did Paul care what people thought? In some ways, yes, he did. Part of him enjoyed the scorn, because when you're trying to turn the world upside down, and have the power of God to help you do it, there's some value in being underestimated by the people who are fighting you, the people who hold the power that needs to be overthrown.

Now all of this might sound grim, the work of repentance, of turning our lives around so that we can turn the world upside down, and have no doubt that it's a lifelong quest with its share of trouble. But also remember that there's great joy in following Jesus. The grace of forgiveness frees us from sin, from the fear of what others might think. Forgiveness liberates us to be the people God wants us to be, to be the agents of the sacred. It's an adventure.

In the midst of the struggle and strife, into the darkness and pain of our lives and our world, "light shall break forth like the dawn, and . . . healing shall spring up quickly." God will ennoble us with titles like "the repairer of the breach," a beautiful image of reconciliation. By giving our time and energy to serve God's purposes, we make an investment in Kingdom of God,

where the treasure of our hearts cannot be consumed or stolen. We will be rewarded for our faithfulness, beyond all measure, and perhaps the greatest reward of all is peace, abiding in the love of God, aware of who we are and whose we are, no longer defined by the whims of others, but by the only one who really matters, the source of all truth and the one who loves us most.

Amen.