

Isaiah 58:1-12  
Psalm 103 or 103:8-14  
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10  
Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Nothing seems quite as contradictory as the scripture readings selected for Ash Wednesday and our custom on this day of having ashes in the form of a cross carefully placed on our forehead for all to see. So we have to wonder. Why on earth were these scripture passages chosen for this day...of all days? To begin with, let's think for a minute about why we wear ash crosses on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday. It's not for ostentatious display. It's not done to draw attention to ourselves. It's not even done to advertise the fact that we are Christians. We take on the ash cross on our foreheads on this day to remind ourselves of our own mortality; to mark our own bodies as frail and decaying each day of our lives; to acknowledge with great humility our sinful and limited selves. The cross we wear on our foreheads is the sign of God's never-ending and all-encompassing love for each of us. It's a reminder of our own salvation through the gift of Jesus Christ. That's why we do it. The season of Lent is not about ostentation or self-denial. It's about the grace of God.

But Jesus is giving us a warning in this passage. He's speaking to all the Jews...and to us...when he talks about the three most sacred practices in Judaism: almsgiving, fasting, and prayer. These are the three spiritual practices that all good Jews observe on a regular basis. There's nothing wrong with that. As a matter of fact, their religion requires that each of them follow each of these three practices. So why does Jesus say "Watch out!" when he's talking to them about those very practices?

Jesus' isn't criticizing them for being obedient in following these practices. Jesus is calling on them to examine their motives in doing so. Why are you giving alms to the poor? Why are you fasting? Why are you spending a certain amount of time in prayer? It's not the activity itself that is the problem. It is the motivation for that activity that can cause problems. Why we do something and how we do something makes all the difference in the world. Sometimes we have to do some intense soul-searching to uncover our true motives. Jesus tells us to "Watch out" because it is easy for us to fool ourselves about our real motives. What's the goal? What's the reward that we seek? Sometimes God knows our hearts better than we do. Only God knows the real reasons why we do what we do....even when we don't know.

And let's face it. All of us want to be accepted by others. Sometimes we want some recognition for what we do. We want our voices to count. We work hard to build a good reputation for ourselves. And we work hard to protect that reputation. We want other people to think well of

us. We enjoy being admired. We want the validation of others. We want to be told...especially by people that we admire...that we are good people. We want to feel proud of ourselves and we bask in the accolades that come to us. They feed the ego! And being the humans that we are, it's hard to resist anything that feeds the ego. We all need that in our psychological diet.

So why does Jesus tell us to "Watch out!" Jesus knows how much we need to be psychologically fed and he's telling us to pay attention to how we get that nourishment. It's not to come from our spiritual practices or from our perceived relationship with God. It can come from other things, but not from those. Jesus tells us to "Watch out!" because our right relationship with God...our righteousness...is a very private matter between us and God. It does not belong in the public square. The nature, quantity and quality of our spiritual practices is not open for inspection by others. Nor should it be. It's a very personal matter.

The criticism that Jesus lays bare is directed at the religious leaders of his day. The ones who are concerned only with the outward show of piety and how that might feed them psychologically and socially. They want to be sure that everyone knows they are practicing almsgiving and fasting and prayer. They want to gain the praise and admiration of those in their community for these expressions of their righteousness.

But they have no righteousness at all...for righteousness is a 'right' relationship with God. And a right relationship with God is not about outward and visible piety. So Jesus says to them, "Watch out!" Don't be seduced by your own needs to do things that *look* like you are a righteous person. If that's the reward you're looking for...the admiration and respect of your community...then you've missed the boat with God. It's not the practice itself that is critiqued, but rather the goal of the practitioner to be noticed by his or her peers. It doesn't matter whether we are talking about almsgiving or fasting or prayer or placing an ash cross on our foreheads. It's about the attitude we have about those things. That's why Jesus says, "Watch out!" Don't kid yourself, he says. It's not nearly as important how other people see us as it is about how God sees us. And God sees even the most private parts of our heart...the parts that we sometimes don't see ourselves.

David Lose, a world-renowned Lutheran pastor says this:

"At the center of this passage is a promise: God sees us. God notices us. God accords us divine attention and pronounces us worthy of God's care and concern. Rooted in the authentic assurance our relationship with God gives us, we can engage in spiritual practices wholeheartedly, not hoping to achieve the approval of others or even of God; but confident that God's approval has already been given. More than that, we can offer our lives as testimony to the One who accords us worth and dignity in the first place, as Jesus instructed just verses earlier: "Let your light so shine before others that they see your good works and glorify your father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

Can the ashes imposed at the beginning of Lent be twisted into public displays of piety in an attempt to be noticed and admired by others? Certainly, more so than most other things we do can. But keep in mind that these ashes were never intended as marks of piety. Rather, they are reminders of our mortality, because when the cross is traced in ash across our foreheads we simultaneously hear the words, "Dust you are and to dust you shall return." Faced with the stark reminder of both our mortality and our absolute dependence on God's mercy and grace, we may actually be better prepared to hear again and believe Jesus' promise that God, who created light from darkness and gives life to the dead, sees us...and loves us to the end."

"Watch out" then as Jesus says, lest we fool ourselves into doing good things for the wrong reasons. Hold fast to the sure and relevant truth that God loves all that God creates. And we are the crown of that creation. We are made in the image of God and God has proved his love for us over and over again. That love has no beginning and has no end and is the only thing we have that is irrefutable and eternal.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.