

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 103

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Why do we do it? Why do we have ashes put on our foreheads once a year? It's a very Christian thing to do and it's one of the few things we do that's so very obviously a public thing. This custom has its history rooted in the Old Testament where there is periodic mention of people wearing sackcloth and being sprinkled with ashes as a sign of contrition, repentance and mourning. It became a Christian symbol during the Middle Ages when the practice of sprinkling ashes on people shifted to the imposition of ashes on the forehead in the form of a cross. It remains an outward symbol of contrition and repentance even today. And everybody can see the smudge on our foreheads. All the scripture readings for today are about not boasting or displaying our good deeds or our piety and here we are for all the world to see with our crosses in plain view on our faces. But the crosses on our foreheads are not about our piety. They are there as an expression of our contrition, our sorrow at our own sinfulness and a reminder of our own mortality. These crosses are there to remind us not only of our dependence upon God, but of the fragility of this life. But this life is not all there is. There's more life...abundant life...in this life and there's more life *after* this life. This life is preparation for the next life and Jesus has quite a lot to say about how we should prepare for that.

Lent is a season of self-reflection, of penitence, of contrition, and of repentance. It's a somber season...a quiet season...a pensive season. It can stir up all kinds of feelings within us about our unworthiness and our shortcomings. 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 our very best, we fail to measure up to what's expected of us. Inside our own heads...probably the single most private place in the world...if we are very brave, we can probably 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 about ourselves than to believe the good stuff. And yet, being down on ourselves...critical of ourselves...is probably *not* 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? Lent is a time to pause for a moment and take stock of where we are in our life journey...physically, emotionally, and

spiritually. It's also a time of preparation...preparation for Jesus' entry into the world again, but not as a baby this time. At the end of Lent we are presented with the crucified Jesus' resurrection 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 during the last year and to take an honest and hard look at where we still have some growing to do. To be quite honest, taking an honest and hard look at ourselves is one of the most difficult things any of us is ever asked to do. And it's something most of us will avoid at all cost. But it's what we need to do to prepare a place for Jesus in our lives.

The Scripture lessons for this service focus on confrontation. Are we doing the things we ought to do in order to honor God? Does God know what we are doing? Does God see 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 their hypocrisy. He tells them that they serve their own interests on their fast days. He sees them fasting and at the same time oppressing people. He sees them fasting and continuing to quarrel with each other. Isaiah shouts at them: 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 then Isaiah tells them what God wants them to do: let the oppressed go free; share your bread with the hungry; bring homeless people into your house; and cover the people who are naked. God will see all this and when you call upon the Lord, the Lord will answer.

Maybe we're supposed to be fasting from self-indulgence and self-centeredness. Maybe we're supposed to be fasting from thinking and acting only on our own needs. Maybe we're supposed to be fasting from play-acting at being 'good.' Jesus calls people on that all that time. Are we steadfastly keeping the letter of the law and ignoring the heart? Jesus had no problem confronting the hypocritical religious leaders of his day. And he probably doesn't have any problem doing that today!

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 we believers might become the righteousness of God. Through our relationship with Jesus and because of our relationship with Jesus we can have a right relationship with God...and that's what righteousness is: a right relationship with God. Paul 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 reputation and bad reputation of both honor and dishonor among men, 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. That's the source of righteousness.

Paul doesn't seem to be too concerned with worldly reputation, but what does Jesus have to say about having a 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 it 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 since 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 are supposed to do.....just as good Christians do them. The quarrel that Jesus has is not with the actions themselves, but with the motivations behind them. Why were they doing these things? 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 a 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 pray 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 either one of those things. 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?

What's 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 everyone 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. For everyone to have enough is a quiet and profound way to build community.

And what about praying? During Jesus' lifetime, he showed us and taught us how to pray. There's no need to be ostentatious unless it is important to us to impress the human hearers of the prayer. God cares less about elegant prose than he cares about the expression of the human heart. 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...our daily bread and forgiveness for our sins. 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 as well as from everyone else. 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 loves 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 the turn of a 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 up the whole house with it. Our task is to figure out the difference between public hypocrisy that has private consequences and private piety that becomes the public proclamation of the word of God. Through our private and ongoing prayers, God will help us figure it out!!

In the end, it's not what we do...it's why we do it!

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.