

Ash Wednesday
Year A

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

Each year, as we approach Ash Wednesday and Lent, we are confronted with a dilemma. Jesus appears to condemn outward displays of worship, yet we will leave this service with a smudge of ashes on our foreheads. How do we reconcile this?

As we read the gospel, which is the same every year, we receive the central portion of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. This is the major teaching section of this gospel, where Jesus relates how we are to approach the topic of worship. Thus, He uses colorful language to make His point.

In this reading, which omits the section including the Lord's Prayer, Jesus discussed three major points of Jewish spirituality. While He uses hyperbole in these teachings, Jesus is not expressing actual practices of first century worship. There is no record of anyone ever using a brass band to announce their almsgiving. Jesus is merely trying to make a point. Almsgiving, prayer, and fasting were fundamental practices in Judaism and we can be sure that the early church continued these disciplines. Jesus, therefore, is not condemning these acts, but is asking us to examine our motivations when acting. It is possible to do each of these acts that Jesus recommends in a manner that will attract attention to ourselves, including going into a closet for prayer, so Jesus is telling us to watch what we do.

If Jesus is not condemning these acts, what is the point of this teaching? While we might focus on motivations, I believe there is another point to be made. What is the focus of our worship? In our daily spiritual walk, are we focused on worshipping God or are we really worshipping religion?

It has been some 2000 years since Jesus died, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. It has been that long that the church has been waiting for His return. Throughout those 2000 years, Christians have been faithful in their worship of God in varying degrees of devotion. In our own lives, there are times when we are fervent in our worship and times that we are really only going through the motions because that is what we have always done. Our hearts are not really engaged. Our practices have become rote.

This can be particularly apparent during Lent. Every year we "give something up for Lent." Many people select some food item or beverage to give up. Or, we take on a new discipline. I am not saying this is wrong and we should not do them. What I am asking is what is our motivation and is this going to change our lives going forward?

Lent is a time for reflection and self-examination. Historically, this was the time new converts were instructed in the faith in preparation for baptism. It was also the time for Christians to walk along side these new converts and reaffirm their commitment to God. This year, I am challenging

all of us to spend time examining our spiritual lives and asking ourselves how we might improve our walk with God. Are there some elements of my spiritual life that need improvement? Is there something I might want to change in my practices? What is God asking me to do differently this year?

As we proceed through Lent, let us focus our energies on God and how we might be used by God in this world.