

## Ash Wednesday , A ✕ D 2011

### Matthew 6:1-6, 16-20

*In the Name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

1 Not “if you give to the needy,” not “if you pray,” not “if you fast” When you give to the needy, sound no trumpet, expect no praise, desire no thanks; when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites who make a show of their prayers. When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, disfiguring their faces, complaining how hungry they are, expecting sympathy.

2 Lent is not optional. Repentance is the whole of the Christian life. Prayer is the normal use for your lips. Giving to the poor is more natural for a Christian than keeping what treasures God gives for our own. Fasting is the normal way to discipline and chasten the body, to make it cooperate with the normal way of life for a Child of God. But there’s the problem, these disciplines do not come naturally. 3 Lent intensifies the otherwise normal activities of the Christian life to teach you one simple point: it’s not about you. In a narcissistic, self-indulgent culture whose primary doctrine is that you need to do what’s right for you, a season for reminding yourself that you are not the most important person in your world is altogether strange. When your stomach rumbles in hunger, fasting teaches you that your belly is not your god. You do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. Food and drink are good gifts from God; to abstain for a time to dedicate yourself to prayer and meditation is an act of thanksgiving. When your schedule commands your full attention, setting aside extra time for prayer teaches you that your schedule is not your god, and that your time is not your own. Every minute of every hour is a gift from God. When your budget or your stack of bills demand where every penny is to be sent, giving alms, giving to the poor, teaches you that money is not your god. The more tempted you are to make money a god, the more Lent exhorts you to give it away.

4 That black smudge on your forehead is to remind you of the substance of your human flesh: dust you are, and to dust you will return. Ashes, like funerals, are no respecters of persons. Everyone has an ugly black smudge on his forehead. Rich and poor alike are marred with palm ash and olive oil. Young and old both hear “Dust you are, and to dust you will return.” Men and women, brave men and cowards, hard-working and couch-sitters, employed and unemployed, self-confident and fear-riddled: everyone alike is marked by ashes. Similarly, funerals don’t care about the size either of your bank account or your ego. Whatever the price of the casket, its contents are the same. They only have funerals for dead people. Dust you are, and to dust you will return.

5 And yet, the smudge on your forehead, however ungeometric, however imperfect, is not shapeless. The ash, which is a sign of repentance, is nevertheless made in the shape of a

cross, the sign of forgiveness, made upon you first when your Lord claimed you through Holy Baptism. Lent is not joyless self-flagellation. The more your eyes are turned away from yourself, the more they are fixed on the cross of Jesus. The more you learn it's not about you, you discover it's about Jesus for you.

6 Dust you are, destined to die: son of Adam, daughter of Eve. But dust He was not. The Second Person of the Trinity, the eternal Word of God, took the dirt of human flesh. The Second Adam redeems the dirt of human flesh by His perfect union of His humanity and His divinity. He who was spotless and without blemish, unspoiled by sin, took the grime of the world's sin, took the filth of your sinfulness. He prayed selflessly, fasted thoroughly, came to give the alms of the Gospel to those poor in spirit. Lift your eyes, behold the cross on which your Lord died. Dust is not your end.

7 Forgiveness, likewise, is no respecter of persons. It is delivered to any and all the Lord chooses. With the water of His Baptism, Jesus has washed away your filth. He has taken away the stain of sin and clothed you with His perfect righteousness. With the oil of His Absolution, Jesus has removed your guilt. He has sealed you in His baptismal grace. As He sees you, no sin, no imperfection, remains. With the wine of His Blood, Jesus fills you with Himself and forgives your sin completely.

8 Lent is not a joyless dirge. It is a time of muted joy, a time for self-denial, a time for preparation. Lent is a journey to Easter. Yes, that Easter, but also the other one, the One where your body will rise too. The One where dust you will be no more. More than a preparation for Easter, Lent is a preparation for your resurrection. All the self-denial, all the prayer, fasting, and alms giving, all the repentance is to focus you away from yourself to your Lord, to the Crucified and Risen One. Even the ashes, a sign of repentance, sharpen your hope for the Day when you will rise from dust, when dust you will be no more.

9 And even now you have a guarantee of your eternal reward. The Lord who came to be dust and bear the consequence of your sin in your stead, who marked you with the seal of His cross in Holy Baptism, gives you proof of your eternal reward. You don't need to wait for the return of Jesus to know His goodness toward you. He gives you Himself—His flesh is true food and His blood is true drink—for the forgiveness of your sins. Where the treasure of forgiveness of your sins is, your cleansed, renewed heart is also.

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Pastor Jeff Hemmer