

Ash Wednesday, A ✕ D 2010

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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

1 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.

2 So Jesus preached, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward... And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward... And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.”

3 Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving are the disciplines of Lent because they are the disciplines of the Christian life. Jesus doesn’t say if you choose to pray, if you decide to fast, if you wish to give to the poor; He says when you give alms, when you pray, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites. To ask if a Christian must fast, pray, or give alms is as wrongheaded as asking if Christians are required to do good works. No, but they do. Alms giving is a good work that benefits your neighbor. It is sinful to neglect it. Prayer is both a discipline and—when offered for your neighbor—a good work. Fasting produces no perceptible benefit to your neighbor. It is not a good work but a Christian discipline.

4 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.

5 Do not practice your good works to be noticed by others, nor exercise these spiritual disciplines to earn the admiration of others. If you do so, your reward is the mere notice of others. Rather, these Christian disciplines intensified during Lent, are to discipline your body, so that you do not give in to your old sinful nature and so lose the eternal reward of life that has been delivered to you already. Lenten disciplines are to turn your eyes away from yourself.

Look at yourself and what do you see? Sin and filth. The smudge of ash is a reminder that, left to your own devices, you will go to hell. Your old sinful flesh is not your friend. The old Adam is a jerk. The old Eve is a menace. Repent.

6 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.

7 Dust you are. 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.

8 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.

9 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.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Pastor Jeff Hemmer