

The holy Gospel according to St. Matthew the 6th chapter:

Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from our Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who see in secret will reward you. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The gospel of the Lord.

In the name of the Father, Son+, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I recently called my grandmother. My grandmother lives in Columbia, South Carolina and suffers with Dementia. At her age and limitations, she doesn't have much to talk about other than church. Well, maybe that is more to talk about than I give it credit some days. So, after her question of "Where are you going?" She always asks, "How is church?"

As I was reminded recently, these are important questions for all of us. We need to ask them often, personally and as a community of faith. "Where are we going?" and "How is church?"

Today begins our journey through the season of Lent. Lent begins this day with a solemn call to fasting and repentance as we begin our journey to the baptismal waters of Easter. During this season, we as the people of God will have opportunity to reflect on the meaning of our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection. Today we receive the sign of ashes, which suggest our human mortality and frailty. "Remember we are dust and to dust we shall return." What seems like an ending is really an invitation to make each day a new beginning, in which we are washed in God's mercy and forgiveness. With the cross on our brow, we long for the spiritual renewal that can only come from the cross and the empty tomb.

*"Our ashes are the ways in which we have turned away from the will and love of God, followed our own will and pursued other loves. Luther said the human being is **incurvatus in se**, curved in upon itself. Our love is like a boomerang that, no matter how piously we aim it at others, always comes wheeling back to our own desires.*

Sometimes we mistake regret for repentance. It's been said that regret is an old man's disease, but what a shame to waste it on the elderly. Anyone can wallow in regret, but not everyone knows how to repent. Repentance entails turning away from yourself (including your regrets) toward someone who has the authority to give the definitive answer to your entire life.

With regret, you're beating up on yourself and loving it. Repentance acknowledges the possibility of an answer that makes things right. Repentance carries us toward the goal of reconciliation. A heart turned toward God is ready to turn toward others."¹

Ash Wednesday is one of the only days in the Christian church year that we are called to look inward. Every other time we are called to look outward with cruciform lenses. Today we are called to journey inward where we encounter and confront all that which causes separation between ourselves and God.

Ash Wednesday calls us to a personal and private journey in the sense that we look deep within and at ourselves and not at others. We compare ourselves to Jesus Christ, not to our friends, or neighbors or the thieves or those we deem "more guilty" than we are. This is a day that we hold the mirror to our faces and to our hearts.

¹ Richard Lischer, Christian Century, "The Shape of Ashes", 2015.

Lent is so often given the wrong mindset. Lent is not a season of how hard we can work for God. Lent is less concerned with “hard work” and more set on “heart work.”

So, as we look inward and do a little naval-gazing, ask yourselves those questions:

“Where are we going?”

“How is Church?”

But, and maybe even a harder question:

“How is it between you and me Lord?”

So often through the season of Lent we only focus on what we can give up, but Lent is also about what we can take on. That is take on spiritually. This is where that “heart work” comes into play.

During these days that lie ahead, take a few moments each day to consciously set aside all the outward noise and demands and quiet the inner chattering of your mind. Then look yourself squarely in the soul and ask:

“How is it between you and me Lord?”

As a church, we ask, “How is church?”

We ask this question “*Not in a critical manner, as in, “I wish they would do things differently,” but in a contemplative, communal way; “Where are we as a church?” “Where are we going?” and, most importantly, “Where is God calling us to be and to go?” Church communities that go years without asking those questions often find themselves wandering around the desert in circles, stuck somewhere between leaving Egypt and arriving at the Promised Land.*”²

As one pastor said, “This is not an easy thing to do or a light commitment to make. Taking a serious personal, inventory of our souls is something most of us would rather not do. Indeed, there are significant barriers to the process.”

-We are too busy for our inner lives.

-We are usually easy graders when it comes to our own lives and hard graders when it comes to the lives of others.

-We are quick to justify ourselves and slow to excuse others.

-We compare ourselves to those we consider beneath us instead of comparing ourselves to Jesus Christ and the glory of God.

-And we are sometimes fearful of what we will see.

² Delmer Chilton, 2015 Ash Wednesday Sermon

It will usually take some kind of outer voice or event to turn us to the inward journey. It can be the words of a parent who cares, or a friend who dares tell us to take a look at ourselves. Hopefully, for many of us it can be the gentle nudge of the Lenten season.

Jesus challenges his followers to put their hearts in the hands of God so that their affections, longings and motivation will be aimed at growing close to God. What we treasure most will claim our affections and direct our lives. Jesus points us to that treasure that will not fade away with the values of this world.

Jesus raises the issue of self-examination by saying, *"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."* The treasure that lasts is inner treasure. The treasure that is passing is outer treasure. Inner treasure is the soul's journey home as it were -- a journey from the temporal to the eternal -- from spiritual death to spiritual rebirth. It is the "rest" of St. Augustine's, *"Our hearts are restless, until they find their rest in thee."*

There is no possible way we can take this journey without looking inward -- without self-examination. In one of his speeches, Martin Luther King said, *"The unexamined life is not worth living."* In fact, the unexamined life is unconscious living -- a life that simply "runs its course" without ever stopping to examine the course.

Self-examination begins with a simple fact that will be driven home all over the world today as Christians in many different lands and countless languages will hear the words, *"...Dust you are and to dust you shall return...."* [Gen. 3:19] As countless thousands of us receive the imposition of ashes, we are reminded that we are mortal -- limited -- temporal beings.

In the hospital, when patients die, a blank is filled in on the chart. "TIME OF EXPIRATION:
_____"

Ash Wednesday is intended to be a bold confrontation with death. This to many in our world is a painful dose of reality; for we live in a culture that wishes to ignore death and dress it up, trying to conceal that which cannot be concealed. As Laurence Stookey stated:

"This harsh medicine of reality is intended to set in motion a reconsideration of the meaning of life and death apart from Christ and in Christ. Ashes, the sign of death, are put on the forehead not in some random pattern but in the shape of a cross. This alters the starkness of the message, which this becomes: You will die. You cannot change that. But you can die in Christ, whose death transforms your own demise. Meanwhile, live in Christ and discover Christ's new life, which conquers death."

It is on Ash Wednesday that we not only receive that cross, as a reminder of our own mortality, but that cross is traced over the cross that was placed on our foreheads long ago in our Baptism. In Baptism, we were marked with the sign of the cross and sealed with the promise of the Holy Spirit forever, both in life and in death. Every time we gather for a meal at God's holy table, we receive the reality of God's great love letter for us, as we are strengthened and nourished. We are reminded as we gather each time at the table that we gather, in the presence of our enemies, assuring us that we can pass through the darkest valley without fear and find our place at the great resurrection feast in the house of the Lord.

The sign of the ashes reminds us of our frailty and mortality. What seems like an ending is really an invitation to make each day a new beginning, in which we are washed in God's mercy and forgiveness. To me, what love is any better than the love God has for each of us? I think none.

As Rachel Held Evans put it: *"It's just death and resurrection, over and over again, day after day, as God reaches down into our deepest graves and with the same power that raised Jesus from the dead wrests us from our pride, our apathy, our fear, our prejudice, our anger, our hurt, and our despair. Most days I don't know which is harder for me to believe: that God reanimated the brain functions of a man three days dead, or that God can bring back to life all the beautiful things we have killed."*

Thus, our Lenten journey is also our Lenten challenge. Where is my treasure? What do I value most? And -- the clincher -- what changes do I need to make to place God and my spiritual life higher on my list of priorities?

In answering, "Where are we going?" "How is Church?" and "How is it with me and you Lord?"

As we walk through this holy season, we keep in mind that we are about "heart work" not "hard work". That "heart work" is lived out in our spiritual practices, as we begin to help the needy, pray, fast, attend Lenten worship offerings, contrast the motivations of being seen and rewarded by others. Through such spiritual practices, especially during the Lenten season, the heart is called home to God ("return to me with all your heart," Joel writes) when we take a good, hard look at what lurks within our own "secret" hearts.

Ultimately, God accomplishes "heart work" more profound than any we could achieve ourselves: creating "clean hearts," mending the broken-hearted, and turning our hearts toward the needs of others.

May God give each one of us the spiritual courage to look within ourselves, confront our sin and experience the joy of reconciliation!

And may you keep a Holy Lent.

Amen.