

Secret Righteousness

February 26, 2020

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Today is Ash Wednesday, the day marking the beginning of Lent, the season where we follow Jesus on his final leg of the journey to the Cross, ending in the resurrection on Easter Sunday. Starting today, people all around the world will start this season off by giving something up for 40 days as a means of showing devotion to and reconciling their relationship with God. Admittedly, I've tried doing this more than once, but, much like New Year's resolutions, those fasts go out the window in no time flat. The most-frequent one I've tried giving up has been chocolate, but given my sweet tooth, I eventually give in to temptation and have some by the second week. Lent also is a time that is heavily meditative and prayerful. People pray not only for forgiveness of sins committed but, by giving up that which tempts them and seems to control them, they might learn greater discipline and not let this world's temptations stand between them and our God. Lent is a time where we as Christians are encouraged to give, not just in terms of giving up that which tempts us but giving more for the betterment of others in their times of need. Prayer, fasting, and offering, all of these are the practices Jesus speaks of in the reading for today.

The first of the elements of discipleship Jesus discusses is almsgiving, what we would understand as "offerings." He speaks of how the hypocrites draw attention to themselves while they do it so that others might acknowledge them and praise them for it. Jesus says, instead, to do this in secret, that only the Father would know and reward your efforts. Now, I personally have never really thought of "offerings" as part of the Lenten season, but one Lenten devotional I've read suggests eating as the impoverished eat and donating what is saved on groceries to groups that support the impoverished and starving. What a wonderful thought that is: instead of spending a couple hundred dollars on material things you don't need, give that money to help support those who have nothing. Instead of buying cookies, ice cream, candy, and all the things that satisfy your sweet tooth, give the money you save in not buying those things to soup kitchens, food pantries, and groups supporting the impoverished. Give that which you don't need to those who need, and not out of desiring acknowledgment, but out of love. That's a powerful thought, but not the only one that Jesus makes.

Jesus then moves on to from almsgiving to speak about prayer. He advises again not to be like the hypocrites, who stand on street corners and in the synagogues and pray, again drawing attention to themselves. Jesus says, rather, to pray in secret, that our Father might be the only one who knows. I invite you for a moment to think about how that would shape your prayer practices. Instead of boasting of your prayers, saying things people want to hear, your prayers are private, composed only of what your heart leads you to say. Rather than using your voice to sound high and mighty, your heart will speak for you, praying for the things that truly concern you and celebrating the things that matter most to you. One Muslim writer speaks about how she prays while she is driving, in line at the bank or the supermarket, and in all these different places, not just in a worship service and not just before she goes to bed. She speaks of doing so in silence, and how this practice has helped her to not only know herself better but to feel closer to God in doing so. I invite you to think what might happen if you prayed not out loud and what you have been told to pray, but in silence, led by what the Spirit guides your heart to say. How

wonderful of a feeling that would be to speak from the heart, knowing that God understands and will not judge your words. Again, this is not all Jesus has to say, though.

Lastly, Jesus moves from speaking on prayer to speaking about fasting. Today's reading is part of the larger "Sermon on the Mount," delivered shortly after Jesus returned from his 40 days in the wilderness, where he fasted all the while, never once complaining of hunger. In the passage, Jesus speaks about how the hypocrites fast, intentionally distorting their faces and groaning so as to let others know they are fasting, and therein get acknowledgement from others about how devout they are for doing so. Jesus says, instead, to fast so that others do not know except our Father. Mind you, fasting does not have to be food-related. As many theologians agree, "fasting" has more to do with the reestablishment of power than the object given up. The point of fasting is to reestablish that you are in control of your cravings (be they food, gambling, pornography, etc.), not your cravings that control you. Imagine your life, your temptations no longer directing your actions, your thoughts, your words, but rather, you have them under control. They are not an issue you have to consciously think about. Think about where your focus would then turn. You're not focused on your cravings any longer, leaving your focus to be redirected towards God and the work He has called you to do in this world. How great of a feeling that would be to know you are doing God's work and showing forth the Love of God in this world.

Fasting, almsgiving, and prayer, three means by which, during this season of reconciliation and movement towards the greatest truth of all, that we are saved by grace and out of love, we rediscover our relationship with God. So, why then must we do these things in secret? Why not shout about our love for God and our willingness to sacrifice for Him from the rooftops? Why does Jesus so strongly emphasize this point? The reason he emphasizes this is because it causes us to evaluate our reasoning then for doing these things. If we do these things in secret, we would receive no acknowledgement from others congratulating us and complimenting us on our faith. The only people who would know then are you and God. In fasting in secret, you find you have the power to overcome temptations/sins, leading to a more righteous lifestyle. By praying in secret, you would pray then for what is in your heart, what you actually mean, leading to a more righteous lifestyle. By giving offerings in secret, you are giving because you want to, not because you'd receive acknowledgement for it. Without the benefit of public acknowledgment and praise from fellow children of God, your intentions are realigned with a holier, more righteous, and more Christ-centered intent. You do these things not because you have to, but because you want to. You do these things not out of seeking self-glorification, but with hallowing God's name in mind. You do these things not because it brings you closer to brothers and sisters, but because it brings you closer to God. Righteousness and humility abound not within the limelight, but within the shadows.