

Ash Wednesday-March 2, 2022
Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

“Do This, But Not to be Seen by Others”

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace and peace to you this evening from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus gives us a difficult undertaking on Ash Wednesday. In a world now so driven by social media whose main purpose is so that whatever you have to show can be seen by as many viewers as possible, Jesus commands the opposite.

This undertaking might be easier if Jesus was asking us to simply hide things that we are ashamed that we do from others. But Jesus commands us to do our good works behind closed doors. This is again, opposed to what the world teaches and does. When we serve the banquet, we gather behind a banner to have a photo taken and post it on Facebook for as many to see as possible. I find it refreshing when a local news channel includes a story when neighbors have gathered together to help a family in need. I will often record good news like this so that I can watch it again. The whole idea of “paying it forward” depends on someone knowing what you have done to encourage others to do the same.

But Jesus doesn't tell us not to do good things. Jesus warns us against the motives we have while we are doing them.

As many of you have worshiped in a Lutheran church for some time, this scripture to you might seem to you that I am preaching to the choir. “Beware of practicing your piety” has been as much of a doctrine of the Lutheran tradition as “Justification by Faith.” This concern for practicing piety so others don't see what you are doing is still demonstrated by the nearly new appearance of our front pews compared to those in the back of the church. I haven't found the scripture yet, but there seems to be an unwritten rule against raising your hands any higher during a worship service than where you can easily read the words that are printed in your hymnal. In our churches, you don't often hear many spontaneous unsolicited “Amen” except when a prayer is ended. Only until recently has the practice of clapping along with an upbeat song been done without being obviously noticed by others. And when it comes to our giving, we are glad to keep what we give to ourselves.

We have done pretty well at keeping our pious acts to ourselves. The problem arises when we are so concerned that no one sees them, we fear and fail to do them. Jesus begins by telling us what we are to do. Jesus wants us to give. Jesus wants us to pray. Jesus wants us to fast. But we are not to do any of these things to bring glory to ourselves as they are seen by others. We do them in secret and our reward will come from our heavenly Father and it is for his glory that we do them.

This scripture about warning against practicing piety or religious acts is always the gospel reading on Ash Wednesday. I keep hoping a different scripture might be assigned for this evening, but here it is again. So tonight, as you receive a dusty cross on your forehead, a cross that only others can see, we warn you to beware of doing such things.

Maybe tonight is the right night for you to hear these words about practicing piety. It seems like the beginning of a new year is the best time to make new year's resolutions. A time to wipe clean your slate of doing where you started with good intentions, and they have now become something much different. Your last year's goal of losing 25 pounds has only turned into a need to lose more. Your last year's goal of ending an unhealthy habit has maybe turned into a different unhealthy habit to end. Ash Wednesday is a good night for new beginnings. A night to remember where we came from before we go anywhere else.

Our Lord reminds us of our genealogy on Ash Wednesday. Our Lord goes as far back as possible to remind us of who we are. We are dust. We would still be dust if it wasn't for God who gave us life. When we start as dust, knowing that we are nothing without God, we can do anything because God is with us and for us.

This will be the theme throughout this Lenten Season. We will hear of the many ways that God is with us. God is with us when we are dust and unto dust we will return. God will not abandon us even when we practice religious acts to be seen by others. What seems impossible for us to do, Christ makes possible. In our acts of piety only Christ will be seen.

Hear these words from Revelation, "Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads." Yes, the cross we see on each other's foreheads tonight does not show how we can bridge our way to God. The cross we see is to remind us of how Jesus came down to us and gave us life on earth and for eternity. Amen