

Ash Wednesday 2021

The holy gospel according to the Sixth Chapter of Matthew.

Glory to you, O Lord.

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

²“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. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵“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. ⁶But 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.

¹⁶“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. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and

wash your face, ¹⁸so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Sermon Ash Wednesday 2021

Lent is here, can you believe it?

What we work on during Lent starting today are the places in our hearts, minds, and our spirits that are frozen and need a little bit of thawing.

I think we can all now imagine vividly what it means when parts in our body are frozen.

Lent is here, can you imagine it?

Can you imagine what you need to work on in your life, what is frozen in your heart, mind or spirit that needs a little bit of thawing?

The hope is that we can work on routines, redoing some good habits in the midst of bad ones.

Or refocus our desire to work on the things in our life that we have been trying to work on but are really hard. And you just have to keep working on them every single day of your life. And we work on them and work on them and work on them.

But never alone. The hope is that with God's help and with the **waters of baptism** that push us and help us grow that we can go into a life of wholeness and keep ourselves moving ever towards God.

Pause The waters of baptism remind me of the time I went to see that Niagara Falls in upstate New York at the border to Canada. What led to that was how at the beginning of my Master's program I did an exchange semester in Los Angeles for one semester.

LA is an awful city but the memories I made and the things I learned at the school of theology I went to were amazing.

After that semester, my best friend, the one I had visited in Japan as I told you about in my sermon last Sunday, came to LA and we took Greyhound buses to travel from LA to New York in one month.

We would ride the bus to a point of interest and explore it and then take the bus again to a new city or place until

we would end up in New York a month later. It was a formative trip where we only met interesting and friendly people and learned a lot about this country and its people and how absolutely big and beautiful the US is.

Eventually we arrived in New York and there we took a tour up to the Niagara Falls. And why I am telling you that story is: We all know or can acknowledge that water is powerful.

But when you stand at the edge of the Niagara Falls you feel how the water pushes air to the sides, you feel a pressure just from the flow of the water. It is hard to describe but when you are there, there is no doubt that there is a lot of power in that water.

There is no stopping it, it does not ask you if you are okay with how much the water pushes forward.

Think of John the Baptist who was baptizing people in a river. The flow of the water symbolizes well how your sins are washed away. The old You flows away.

Water is powerful and baptism changes you.

When you think of a waterfall as powerful as Niagara Falls,

can you imagine what it means when I say:

we hope for God's help in our work in Lent and the **waters of baptism** push us and help us grow that we

can go into a life of wholeness and keep ourselves moving ever towards God?

We hope for God's help in our work in Lent and the **waters of baptism** push us,

Yes, Lent is a time where we want to work on our hearts, minds, and spirit. And it is the promise of our baptism that reminds you every day you are not doing it alone.

And what does that work look like? What are we to understand from Jesus' words in today's gospel text on what we should do and what we should not do in this time of Lent?

Jesus cautions us against public acts of piety. Piety means being devout to God and God's teachings, being virtuous.

So, Jesus cautions us against public acts of -- basically showing off our faith.

And that is the gospel text that comes up on Ash Wednesday, every year. We read the text to not do public acts of piety and then we get ready for the imposition of the ashes.

So, I always thought it was ironic. Is Ash Wednesday not the one day of the year where we leave worship with something visible on our foreheads, showing to everyone

we see that we have been to church, showing off our faith?

In other years, what did you do? Do you wipe the ashes off before stepping outside? Do you leave them on and then have several people say to you "You've got something on your forehead"?

Have you ever wondered about that? Why we read the text of how Jesus says not to do public acts of piety and then we get the ashes on our forehead and go out in public?

This year we do not have to wonder, we won't impose ashes today on our forehead.

But kind of will in our hearts. We still enter into the discipline of Lent.

But what are we supposed to think? That, because of the pandemic we are finally doing it right and don't leave the service with a public sign of our piety?

No, I think Jesus does not tell us to refrain from all acts of public piety. What Jesus seems concerned with is the *why*, not the *what*. It is about self-examination.

Why do you pray in public? Why do you give alms? Why do you fast?

If appearing faithful is a way to build yourself up before others, then it is not faithfulness but hypocrisy.

On the other hand, if praying over a meal in a restaurant is something you do because praying at meals is part of your faith, by all means bow your head and pray.

If it is important for your Lenten journey to be reminded of your mortality, your need for forgiveness, but also the love and salvation that is given to you by Christ's dying on the cross,

then imposing ashes on your forehead is okay.

As the season of Lent begins each year, we are invited to take on three great disciplines: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

I invite you to use these disciplines to thaw your heart, mind, and spirit.

They bring us closer to God again, so we reach wholeness.

Jesus' words in the gospel remind us that our acts of faithfulness always come as a response to God's gifts.

So be humble in all you do because you cannot do it alone, you do it with the help of God.

Piety is not something to brag about. Piety is not something to be proud of.

Piety is but acknowledgment of the one who first gave us everything.

And who is that? Well, Paul makes it clear: we only become righteous in Jesus.

We know grace only because Jesus becomes our sin. This is the grounding for everything we do throughout the holy days of Lent.

So, let us grow closer to God in heart, mind and spirit. By trusting in the powerful water of baptism as the gift from God to push us through Lent in our praying, our fasting, and in our almsgiving.

Amen