

Does anyone else feel a little strange right now after hearing the gospel lesson for today? Let me clarify, does anyone feel a little strange about hearing Matthew's account, smack in the middle of Jesus' sermon on the mount, just moments before we come forward and receive ashes on our forehead? For Episcopalians, there is a good chance that today is one of the few days that something we do in church will be noticed by passers by. Let's face it, who hasn't been told on Ash Wednesday that we have something on our face?

Welcome to the wonderful paradox of Ash Wednesday. Where we gather together, are warned by Jesus to beware of practicing your piety before others and immediately turn around and receive the sign of the cross on our foreheads that EVERYONE can see! I'll let that sink in. As I have struggled with my obligatory gen-x-er who now spends a lot of time with millennials negative reaction to anything that smacks of inauthenticity, I now understand that there is no risk of being (gasp) a hypocrite as you enter the world post-ashing. Let me explain.

What Jesus was warning against in today's gospel was making a show for others to see, not for God's glory, but for one's own edification and standing in the eyes of others. His examples spell it out clearly enough.

The issue I would argue is motivation. When people are heaping praises on you for your observances isn't that missing mark? Hear Joel's words again, "rend your hearts and not your clothing." The difference between that which is seen versus the unseen. The change and observances that affect our own hearts, and in turn our relationship with God are interior ones, between you and God. We shouldn't be in the mindset of impressing God and others, rather, we should be about reconnecting and returning to God. Funny thing is, as we do that, we in turn can do so with those around us. This is the very heart of reconciliation.

I came across a wonderful poem in Roger Hutchison's new book entitled "Under the Fig Tree" a collection of prayers, poems, and artwork for the season of Lent.

Today's poem goes:

"ashes  
a poignant reminder of the depth of this season we find ourselves in again  
Lent  
we give up and we look up  
we give up and we look in  
we give up and we look out  
up to the face of Christ  
in to that intimate place that longs for something more

out to the faces of our brothers and sisters who need us- and who we need...”

Rend your hearts and not your clothing indeed. I think this perfectly captures the challenge of today. It reminds us that all we do, must first come from a place of deep yearning for, and expression of our need for God. We give up our selves and our need to justify ourselves in order to look up, look in, and look out. Isn't that what these ashes are for?

Reminding us where and whom we come from, and where and whom we return to. It is from this point of recognition, of remembrance, reconciliation, all our work must start, for the good of our relationship with God, in order to move outwards for the good our neighbor and the world. Shouldn't that always be our motivation? Bring on the ashes, may they last longer than the (afternoon) (evening).