

## *Jesus Has Issues!*

Today's gospel really highlights the tension between Jesus and the Pharisees, those religious leaders whom he refers to as "hypocrites."

And why is there tension? Because they like to give alms (that is, money to charity) publicly. They like to pray publicly. And they like to fast publicly. And all because they like to "be seen by" others.

And Jesus calls that an inauthentic piety, or a false piety.

Instead, this is what Jesus suggests:

When you give alms, "do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing."

When you pray, "go into your room and shut the door."

And when you fast, "put oil on your head and wash your face." In other words, don't let your outside reveal what's going on inside.

It's all pretty straight-forward advice.

However – and maybe you picked up on this already – all of this raises the question, "How can a text that calls for *private* acts of righteousness and devotion, be proclaimed on the same day when people receive the imposition of ashes, which a very *visible* and *public* act of piety?"

Well, it turns out that what we need to keep in mind is what is the *real* issue for Jesus, and it's this: Authenticity. You see, for Jesus, sometimes *what* you do is not nearly as important as *why* you're doing something. Let me give you an example.

The children's book *The Frog and Toad Treasury*, by Arnold Lobel, talks about the friendship and adventures of Frog and Toad. In a chapter entitled "The Surprise," the action takes place in October.

The leaves are falling, and Frog decides to go to go to Toad's house, secretly, and rake his leaves for him. But Toad has the same idea. Both manage to arrive at the home of the other unseen, they each determine that no one is home, each rakes the leaves of the other, and each returns to their own house unnoticed.

On their respective ways home, however, a wind comes. The wind blows and blows. The piles of leaves do too, so that the leaves are scattered everywhere. At the end of the day, neither Frog nor Toad realizes what the other has done, because both return home to find leaves still strewn across their yards. And both pledge to rake their own leaves the next day.

As Frog enters his home, he thinks, "How surprised Toad must be." And as Toad enters his home, he thinks, "How surprised Frog must be." That night, Frog and Toad were both happy when they each turned out the light and went to bed.

In the end, what was at stake for Frog and Toad, in each one's act of charity, was not a response or acknowledgment, nor even the accomplishment itself. They were simply acts of love and service. That's all that mattered. And that makes them authentic.

The question that we may need to be asking ourselves, during this season of Lent, is not "What?" As in

*What* spiritual discipline will I take on during Lent?

*What* indulgence will I give up during Lent?

*What* good work of charity will I undertake during Lent?

Maybe the question we should be asking is "Why?" As in

Why am I taking something on?

Why am I giving something up?

Why am I doing something special for someone during Lent?

Why?

And answering that question might not only help you decide if a particular act of devotion or piety is authentic or inauthentic, but it also may be the very thing that moves you in the right direction on your spiritual journey.

But if that doesn't work for you, then I offer you a prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. Let it be your Lenten prayer and meditation. And allow its words to mold and shape you, to lead and guide you; so that, in the end, you too will become an instrument of God's peace.

And isn't that what we all truly seek?

I think so.

Amen.