

Theme: Humble religious practice

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, we long to be with you and honor you for your creation of us and everything around us and your love for us; let us honor you with humility and hear how to do this through your son, our saviour, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

It is good to begin what we do with prayer. That is why I began sermons with a prayer a number of years ago. Many have written about prayer: what to do and what to say. Many more will write about prayer seemingly because we don't necessarily agree with one right way to pray.

In the poem "Cyrus Brown's Prayer" by Sam Walter Foss (circa 1900) one deacon says the proper way for a man to pray is "down upon his knees." Another says that standing straight with outstretched arms is the way to pray. A third, "with eyes fast closed and head contritely bowed." And the last says,

"It seems to me his hands should be austerely clasped in front, with both thumbs pointing toward the ground," said Reverend Doctor Blunt!

Then comes the reply by Cyrus Brown.

"Last year I fell in Hodgkin's well, head first," said Cyrus Brown, "With both my heels a stickin up and my head a pintin' down, and I made a prayer right then and there; best prayer I ever said. The prayin'est prayer I ever prayed, a standin' on my head."

That was not a pose recommended by Jesus, but it sure was appropriate! The Episcopal Church has adopted the ancient Christian custom of standing for prayer. Of course, this custom is also the Jewish custom for prayer and therefore is the way Jesus prayed. It just so happens to be the least conspicuous way of prayer than the other methods of the poem and which are also common among many Christians. Jesus practiced prayer and taught about prayer.

The gospel reading we hear on Ash Wednesday is from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is giving advice on how to practice piety. Piety, or religious spiritual practice, is how we express our devotion to God. Much of what we do is based in Jewish piety, which makes sense because Jesus and his disciples were Jews. Jesus here is giving his disciples, and us as his disciples, some do not do thises.

Jesus is reacting to an excess of religious devotion, which seems odd. How can our devotion to God be in excess? What Jesus is talking about is when our religious actions are done to puff ourselves up versus improving our relationship with God. In other words, we should ask ourselves if a spiritual practice is being done for us or for God. Where is our focus?

He says that when you are doing good deeds, you are not to make a big deal out of it or call undue attention to what you are doing. If you do, God will not give you a plaque and God will not alert the media.

What Jesus is talking about is motivation. If we do good deeds because we want the attention and/or let people to know how good we are, then we are doing good deeds for the wrong reasons. We do good deeds because we love God and we everyone else. When we love our neighbors, good deeds are a natural consequence of being a follower of Jesus. If publicity results, then that is okay. It is an evangelical opportunity. But the important point is that publicity was not sought. Our behavior is not predicated on seeking attention.

Jesus continues by giving examples of how people do good things for the wrong reasons. When you give to the poor, don't make a big deal out of it. Those who seek that kind of attention tend to be hypocrites and are just seeking praise from others. Since they have already received their reward, God won't chalk it up to any big deal.

So when you do give to the poor, don't think about how it looks and make no big deal about. It is not necessary to call a press conference. When you give secretly, God will take notice and God will be pleased.

When you pray, don't make a big deal out of it. Don't be like those who stand up and pray in church and on the street corners. They are doing this just to show off. They are already rewarded. Again, Jesus is talking about

some of the religious leaders of his time who made a big show of their piety and knowledge. If there is anything Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount that Episcopalians follow to the letter, it is about not praying publicly.

Because when you do pray, do it in private where you can just be yourself before God. It is there that you can be honest with God and you can focus on God's presence. Do this and God will be pleased. Please don't miss Jesus' point. If you go into a room to pray secretly, then you will be like the hypocrites. The point is to pray out of the love of God no matter where that is.

What we didn't hear today is what Jesus says next. Jesus admonishes people not to pray like the gentiles do who use a lot of words and empty phrases. Instead, Jesus tells them to pray the words that we later called the Lord's Prayer.

When you fast, don't look gloomy or act like you are suffering. You're just showing off. Buck up! Otherwise, you have already received your reward. Instead, take a shower, comb your hair, brush your teeth, and look nice and pleasant. That way you won't call attention to yourself. If your stomach growls, then so be it. Again, if you clean yourself up while fasting in order to be noticed, then you are like the hypocrites and there is no divine reward.

Don't hoard money and wealth. Nothing on earth is permanent. And besides, thieves are always looking to take what is not theirs and if they hit you, then where will you be? Just ask the Bernie Madoff victims. They succumbed to the idea of making a fast buck. It's an illusion. Instead, store up treasures in heaven. In heaven everything lasts forever and there are no thieves. Wherever you keep your treasure, that's where your heart will be found.

For three of these examples, the question of reward is left up to God. When we leave these concerns to God, then we are free to look out for others. Jesus is teaching about the three cornerstones of Jewish piety: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. In doing so, he is contrasting the hypocrites with the righteous.

The root of the Greek word hypocrite is actor. Jesus is saying that these hypocrites are acting out their piety without really being pious in their hearts. They are all about show and not conversion. They love themselves more than they love God or others.

The bottom line is this: Do we want human rewards or do we want divine rewards? So here we are in a quandary. We are going to receive ashes as an act of devotion. Are we showing off or are we sincere? Do we keep our ashen crosses or do we wash our faces? A way to answer these questions is by answering this one, “Do we wear our ashes seeking human reward?”

Unfortunately, we live in a culture that is increasingly hostile to public shows of devotion. To keep our ashes on is really no different than wearing a cross. If we keep our ashes on our foreheads to prove to others of our great piety to God, then we should wash them off. If we wear our ashes to let others know that Christians are in society and we are a Christian and we take following Jesus seriously, then we should keep the ashes on our foreheads.

I will soon bless the ashes we will wear. In actuality, these ashes were palms blessed almost a year ago on Palm Sunday when we sang hosannas in procession to greet Jesus the king. This sign of our ashes and dust are only a partial sign. Our ashes are given life by the Holy Spirit.

We will wear the ashes of our mortality on the same foreheads that bear the seal of him who died for us. That baptismal seal never fades. Christ’s name is always on our foreheads. Through our baptism, we will fast – we will pray – we will give money, all without thought of reward so that the world will believe.

We now pray: Gracious God and giver of all good gifts, please give us the gift of humility, through which we show our devotion to you, focused on you and not ourselves, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Text: **Matthew 6:1–6, 16-21** (NRSV)

6 “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.^a

^a Other ancient authorities add *openly*

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. ⁶ But 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.^b

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. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so 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.^f

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

^b Other ancient authorities add *openly*

^f Other ancient authorities add *openly*

^g Gk *eating*

^h Gk *eating*

ⁱ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mt 6:1–6, Mt 6:16–21). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.