

Theme: Getting over ourselves

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, we gather this day with self-examination, entering the season of Lent intent on improving ourselves; help us we pray, to be worthy followers of you and your son, through whom we pray. Amen.

In a Seinfeld episode entitled "The Fix Up," Jerry (Jerry Seinfeld) and Elaine (Julia Louis-Dreyfus) are trying to set up a blind date for George (Jason Alexander) with one of Elaine's friends, Cynthia (Maggie Wheeler). Early in the episode, the scene shifts back and forth between Jerry's apartment, where he is describing Cynthia to George, and Elaine's apartment, where she is describing George to Cynthia. The rapid-fire dialogue is a good example of just how shallow we often are in what we are looking for in a relationship.

The scene begins in Jerry's apartment, where he is talking about Cynthia with George.

"What does she look like?" George asks.

"She's good looking," Jerry replies.

George wants details: "How good looking?"

"Very good looking," Jerry replies.

Still unsatisfied with Jerry's answer, George presses him: "*Really* good looking?"

"Really very good looking," Jerry replies.

"Would *you* take her out?" George asks.

Jerry hesitates for a moment before saying, "Yes. I would."

"You hesitated!" George screams.

"Hesitate? I didn't hesitate!" Jerry says.

"Something's up!" George says in a panic. "You hesitated!"

"I'm telling you—she's good-looking," Jerry insists.

"What about the body?" George asks.

"Good body. Nice body," Jerry replies.

"*Really* good?" George asks.

"Really very nice and good," Jerry replies.

"What about personality?" George asks.

"Good personality. Funny. Bright," Jerry replies.

"I don't want anyone smarter than me," George says nervously.

"How could she be smarter than you?" Jerry says with a smirk.

The scene shifts to Elaine's apartment, where Elaine is talking about George with Cynthia.

"First of all, what does he do?" Cynthia asks.

"He was in real estate," Elaine replies. "He's not working right now."

"How come he's not working?" Cynthia asks.

"He got fired," Elaine replies.

"Why did he get fired?" Cynthia asks.

"He tried to—." Elaine hesitates before continuing. With a wince she says, "Poison his boss."

"Excuse me?" Cynthia exclaims.

"It's such a long story," Elaine says in George's defense. "Seriously! He just had some problems at work!"

"Is he nuts?" Cynthia asks.

"No," Elaine replies. "He's a really, really funny guy."

"What does he look like?" Cynthia asks.

"Well, he's got a lot of character in his face," Elaine replies. "He's short. Stocky."

"He's fat!" Cynthia says. "Is that what you're saying? He's fat?"

"Powerful!" Elaine replies. "He's so powerful he can lift 100 pounds right up over his head!"

It's clear that Cynthia wants more of a description, so Elaine continues:

"What else? He's kind of—just *kind of*—losing his hair."

"He's bald?" Cynthia says.

"No, no, no!" Elaine replies. "He's not bald. He's *balding*."

"So he *will* be bald?" Cynthia says.

"Yeah," Elaine says, defeated.

(DVD, Season 3, Disc 4 ("The Fix Up"); 00:06:42 - 00:09:03)

Jesus reminds us on this day of Ash Wednesday to get over ourselves and be for others. We are not to be shallow like the characters on Seinfeld. And we are not to practice our faith as if we were a character on Seinfeld.

The gospel reading we hear on Ash Wednesday is from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is giving advice on how to practice piety. 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. Bill Gates can't seem to give any money away without a press conference. He is concerned with the public's perception of him and his great wealth. He needs no further reward from God. 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. 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.

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? 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, give us the gift of right piety; may our intentions be made out of love of you and others and not out of any self-centeredness on our parts, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Text: **Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21** (NRSV)

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. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so 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. 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.

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