

ASH WEDNESDAY
JOEL 2:1-2, 12-17
MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21
MARCH 6, 2019

We often speak of our faith as a gift from God which is unique to each person. It is a personal faith but it is not a private faith. I do not keep it to myself. I am not afraid of others seeing my faith. I cannot have faith for you and you cannot have faith for me or anyone else. We also preach and teach that as people of God we reach out in love. We share with those that are hurting and we feed those that are hungry. These are outward expressions of our faith. Jesus says that they will know we are Christians by our love. We do not keep love to ourselves but we share it. Others know our love by the things we do. A faith active in love is a faith that is visible to those round us. We shine our light for others to see. As we come to the beginning of this season of Lent we hear a message that says we are to not practice our piety before others. This message is part of the reading for today from Matthew 6.

Matthew 6:1 “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.

We hear this message from our Lord and we might be tempted to think we should not shout it out because others will see and think we are blowing our own whistle. We might think we need to be careful about calling attention to our piety. Piety is not a word we hear much anymore. Piety is also translated righteousness. In the church it means having a right practice and doing right things. It means acting according to our faith and in response to God’s will. We might think someone is pious when they bring their tithe into the treasury or when they take their turn reading lessons or serving as an usher.

When Jesus talked about practicing piety before others the Jews listening to him would have understood what he is talking about. When Jesus talked about almsgiving, fasting and prayer the Jews would have recognized these as the disciplines of their lives. Jesus did not tell the Jews to stop doing those things. He did not tell them to stop being pious or righteous. They just were not to make a show of it. Their piety was to give glory to God and not call attention to themselves. When Jesus says they must not be like the hypocrites he is saying they must not act like those that are seeking attention for themselves. They were not to do these important actions to gain fame and fortune but to give glory and honor to God.

The Greek word for hypocrite actually means “actor.” It means one that wears a mask and acts for an audience. It was not necessarily a bad thing to be called a hypocrite. The word in itself is not a bad word. There are many among us that attend theater productions and others act in those productions. In this reading when Jesus talks about hypocrites he is talking about those that are merely acting when it comes to practicing their piety. His warning is that those that are merely practicing for the benefit of others will have no reward from our heavenly Father.

Matthew 6:5, 6 “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. 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.

Jesus taught concerning giving alms not allowing your left hand to know what your right hand is doing. He tells us that we offer our gifts to the poor not thinking about who will see you do it. Jesus said the same about fasting. When fasting, do not call attention to yourself. He said to wash your face and comb your hair so that your heavenly Father will see

even if others do not. The same is true of our prayer life. Jesus says that when we pray we are to not be like the hypocrites who love to be seen but to go into your room to pray. Jesus wants us to pray. God wants to hear from God's children just like parents want to hear from their children and grandchildren. Prayer is our way of building our relationship with God. It also builds the relationships among people in the church. It means so much when we are praying for each other. When I know you are praying for me I feel that I am supported by the body of Christ. I feel uplifted and valued. When I pray for you I also enter into your life, the good times and the times that cause you to struggle.

Jesus does not tell us to stop praying. He says that we pray our prayers to God rather than to be noticed by others. We are to pray to God if others are listening and if they are not listening. When I pray my morning prayers I am usually alone in my chair. My family most often does not hear me pray but God does. When I pray for guidance as I prepare sermons others do not hear me but God does. When I pray in my quiet place God hears my prayers. When we pray our prayers on Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings the prayers are heard by everyone around us. The worship leader is wearing a microphone so the prayers can be heard. When the worship leader asks for your prayer petitions some of you offer them aloud and others hear your prayers. God also hears those prayers that are prayed in the public space. The issue is not so much where you are praying but that your prayers are to God and not for public show. I don't worry about someone hearing me pray but I want God to hear my prayers.

Today we will offer ashes to anyone that desires ashes. You might wonder if this is a pious act that will be seen by others. The truth is that some will see your ashes and wonder what it is all about. They might think you are pushing your religion on them. We offer ashes as a sign of our faith.

We want to be reminded that Jesus died on a cross that we would have life. Ashes are an outward sign of repentance and of seeking a right relationship with God. We offer ashes at the beginning of Lent to help us remember that this is a season of repentance, self-examination and self-denial. We worship the Lord in this way because we know that God is pleased with our repentance and our desire to come closer to the Lord.

We will make our way through this season of Lent and we will come to a closer relationship with God. We will draw closer to God because God has already drawn closer to us. We give our lives to the Lord and we are not embarrassed to be seen serving the Lord. We walk by faith and we give glory to God. AMEN