

Disfigured Faces

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Have you ever noticed that Jesus had plenty of tolerance for all kinds of sinners, but no patience at all for religious show-offs? In Matthew's gospel, we hear Jesus' condemnation of any acts of piety performed for the superficial reward of impressing others instead of to experience God more authentically.

Jesus has a harsh word for those people who put on holier than thou airs in public: hypocrites. Their behavior might impress others, and thus get them the reward they are looking for. But it doesn't impress God.

Jesus warns his listeners against such superficial spirituality. He cautions: Do not make a loud fanfare when you give to charity, don't make fancy prayers just for show, and don't disfigure your faces to let everyone know just how much pain and sacrifice you are willing to suffer for God.

So, what is it that we are doing here tonight? Our Ash Wednesday ritual of being marked with a cross of ashes is arguably the very sort of thing that Jesus condemned! What does Jesus think about our leaving here tonight with *our* faces disfigured by a black smudge on our foreheads; an emblem of our religious dedication worn for all the world to see?

But I suspect that the search for such recognition is not what brought you here tonight. My guess is that some of you will be grateful that it is dark outside when you leave here and that there is little risk of being seen by anyone. We might just feel embarrassed by such a brazen display of religion in a secular minded world where it is more acceptable to keep our faith to ourselves. We are all too willing to do our giving, our praying, and our fasting behind closed doors, but a little self-conscious when it comes to wearing it out on the town in such a public way.

It is not courting the approval of others that is our severest temptation, but the concealment of our faith from others who might judge us or snicker at us behind our backs. Which is precisely why it is important to be here tonight. Ash Wednesday is a time to go back to the basics of what it means to be a Christian. It is a humble reminder of our essential selves, created of the dust and ash of the earth, yet animated by the breath of life breathed into us by God's own Spirit. And it is a chance to acknowledge what in our lives keeps us from realizing all that we were created to be. It is an opportunity to remember also, who God is, and what God has done for us.

The Ash Wednesday focus on sin and repentance is not an exercise in either pride or self-loathing. It is an invitation to examine those things that get in the way of our fully experiencing the love God wants to show us but that we may be turning our backs on in order to pursue

other lesser loves. The cross of ash that we bear on our foreheads points not to our own sanctimonious self-image; but to the cross of Christ which transforms the ashes of our lives into something of infinite value. The ashes worn on our forehead or on our hand are not there to make an impression on someone else. They are there to refresh our awareness of that we don't have to rely on the fleeting approval of others for our sense of worth. Instead, we can know something about ourselves that we tend to forget. Which is that we are more than just the dust of life in the eyes of our Creator. What the mark we leave here wearing should signify is the repentance-- the turning from our way to God's way--that opens the door for us to receive the gift that is being freely offered.

So, the text from Matthew for tonight speaks clearly to us. Not with condemnation, but with assurance. We do not disfigure our faces tonight in order to be seen by others, thereby gaining praise for ourselves. Nor do we hide the mark in the hopes that it will not be seen, that we will not jeopardize the carefully crafted and guarded image that we present to the world to gain its approval.

We do allow our faces to be disfigured in order to rid ourselves of all these things. To empty ourselves, which is the very essence of humility. We do this in order to be filled by God in Christ. We do these things, not to be miserable, but rather in joyful anticipation that by losing ourselves we will be truly found. We do these things not as phony hypocrites, but rather in order to be real about our origins and our destiny. During Lent we are called to rediscover who we are as God's people. We are called to face our fears and our failures with courage and dignity, relying not on the crutch of public opinion, but trusting solely on God's love and mercy.

So, wear your ashes in humility, because they are not there to announce our own righteousness. But never wear them in shame, because they testify to the righteousness that only God can confer on us.

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