

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12 •

Psalm 51:1-17 •

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 •

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Sermon for Ash Wednesday 2024

LENTEN COMMITMENTS

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

I suppose the central reality, certainly the reality most difficult for most of us to acknowledge, revealed by the Incarnation is our inability to discover the ways of God, the nature of God, the mind of God on our own. Could we have done so, there would have been no need for the Incarnation, there would have been no reason of God to have inserted His own presence into human history, to provide by divine intervention what could not have been acquired by human reflection or human experience.

Ah, we say, but Jesus did come, and dwelt among us; Jesus did come to model God's activities, to make manifest to human experience the divine nature, and to instruct that same humanity in heavenly truths... so that now we do know the ways of God, the nature of God, and the mind of God.

And at some level of meaning, that is undoubtedly true. The world was changed spiritually by the presence of Jesus in it, because it thereafter offers the possibility of experiencing God as a person, just as a sunny day offers the possibility of going outside and enjoying the world.

But I think it's important to remember, especially as we enter into the season of Lent, the season of repentance, that the very prideful presumption that the Incarnation exposed was not simply limited to the pre-Christian history, but that it is rather something deeply rooted in our universally shared human nature, and something that requires the steady and daily attendance on our parts, not to how close we have drawn to God, but to the unfathomable distance that, for all of us, saints and sinners alike, still remains.

Let me explain by drawing attention to something fairly remarkable about the instruction provided in our Gospel text for this evening, so let's go ahead and read it together.

Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

6 *“Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ² Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. ³ But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you ^[a] openly.*

The Model Prayer

⁵ *“And when you pray, you shall not be like the ^[b]hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. ⁶ But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you ^[c] openly.*

¹⁶ *“Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the ^[a]hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. ¹⁷ But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you ^[b] openly.*

Lay Up Treasures in Heaven

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

If any of us were asked to compile a list of the most serious human delinquencies, I suppose at the top for most of us would be things like murder, adultery, greed, betrayal of trust, the lust for power and dominance, and so on. These are certainly the types of wickedness that stand out both in literature and culture, as well as receiving formal acknowledgement by the penalties attached to them in courts of law, and the condemnation attached to them in the court of history.

But one of the many surprising things we find in the recorded words of our Lord is that there is almost no mention, or only the most passing, of human failings of those kinds. What we find instead is Jesus again and again, in many different contexts and with many different images, focusing our attention, not on blood and mayhem and betrayal, but rather, as he does in the Gospel reading for this evening, on two things: First, anonymity in one’s obedience to God, and second, solitude in one’s relationship with God.

Let’s read again what Jesus tells us about acts of charity, that is, obedience to God’s instruction to love one another:

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.

6:3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,

6:4 so that your alms may be done in secret;

Or let’s read again, what Jesus tells us about our communication with God:

whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.

We didn't need the incarnation to learn that murder is wrong, that warfare is terrible, that betrayal is shameful ... even if so often in the breach, these moral verities are common knowledge throughout human history and across the widest variety of religious and moral thought. And hopefully for those of us gathered here this evening, the temptations towards those awful deeds are not compulsive in our lives. And perhaps that's the reason why Jesus seems relatively unconcerned with warning us about them, because truly monstrous behavior from the human perspective is not a great temptation for most people.

But we must at least consider another possibility: that the reason why Jesus instead directs our attention where he does is because those are not only more universal, but more subtle, and possibly even, in God's mind, more insidious, and more difficult both of repentance and reform, exactly because of their subtlety. It's very hard to imagine that Jesus simply focused so much of his attention on items He found well down on the list of human inequities. Much more likely, I suspect, that he does so because they lie very near, perhaps even at the top of such a list.

The ashes that we will apply to our foreheads tonight are symbolic both of mortality and humility. They are a reminder both of our distance from God, and of the narrow gate we must pass through, we all must pass through, to enter on the endless journey towards God. But that gate is not wider for us now than it was for those before Christ: it's the same gate.

I'll use the terms 'performative goodness' and 'performative piety' to refer to these tendencies in human beings, to the temptations of the human spirit that seem to be the central focus of Christ's concern and admonition. And surely the season of Lent that begins this evening, the season in which we are invited to subject our own lives to evaluation and reform, in order to begin or continue the process of bringing our lives into greater conformity with our Lord's instruction, surely this season is the ideal time to reflect on how we might take conscious and deliberate steps to foster that conformity, to rid ourselves of the temptations to performative goodness and performative piety, or at least begin to whittle away at the strength of their temptation.

So here are my suggestions for how we might seriously make practical application in our lives to the instructions of Jesus that we find in our Gospel selection during this Lenten season, suggestions that have arisen during discussion of these matters in my own church.

As for the warning against performative goodness that figures so prominently in His instruction, my suggestion is that we seek every day during this season of Lent to do something, at least one thing, to benefit one of our brothers or sisters, preferably someone who has no claim on our love, even those we perceive as our enemies or at least not deserving of our regard in any way, and – and here’s the important thing – that we never mention it to anyone, not to our friends, not to our confidants, not to our parishioners, not to our family, most of all, not even to the beneficiaries of our charity. It is the suggestion that we love someone as we love ourselves, and that we do so in complete anonymity, known only to ourselves and to God.

And as for the warning against performative piety, my suggestion is that we set aside some time every day to be completely alone with God. Perhaps this might be time spent in prayer, perhaps in meditation, perhaps simply in companionable silence; but in any event, to detach our thoughts, our activity, and our concern from the world, and to rest completely and without distraction, in our relationship with our heavenly Father. We might even, every day, repeat this simple request:

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

And to make sure we are honoring the commitment to solitude, say it aloud, where there’s no one to hear. Perhaps even go into a closet, if necessary, and shut the door.

Of course, these are only suggestions. But whatever we do to temper in ourselves the human temptation to performative goodness and performative piety, and perhaps as an incentive for maintaining our Lenten commitments, we must also remember that Lent is not merely a season of solemn dedication to reform, but also a journey that leads us to the joy of Easter. The ashes on our foreheads, while a mark of mortality and humility, also point us toward the hope of resurrection. In Christ, we find the ultimate transformation – from death to life, from sin to redemption. Let us approach this season with the assurance that, through God's grace, our brokenness can and will through eternity be transformed into wholeness, and our relationship with God can and will through eternity be transformed into perfect harmony and peace.

And so, my friends, as we enter this season of Lent, let us wear the ashes of repentance with hopeful hearts. May we embrace the transformative journey that

leads us from ashes to grace, from brokenness to healing. Let our Lenten disciplines be a means of drawing closer to the One who creates, renews, and redeems. As we journey together, may we be transformed by the love that was revealed to us on the cross and the hope that triumphed from an empty tomb. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.