

Ash Wednesday Message
March 1, 2017
Text: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ

"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.

"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.

But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"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.

"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.

But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 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.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Ash Wednesday. What an interesting and special day. There is something mysterious and even odd about having ashes put on our forehead; ashes made by burning the palm branches of a previous year's Palm Sunday. Ash Wednesday begins our journey through Lent. It's a day to face our shortcomings as we seriously engage in a self-inventory of our faith walk. The scriptures read tonight all underline this theme, and they focus our attention on getting right with God. All through history, it seems, we human beings just cannot get this religion thing right.

And in Matthew's gospel Jesus has a lot to say about how to conduct oneself as a person of faith. This passage is a strongly stated "how-to" on religious behavior. "Do this, and don't do that..."

It's part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and draws the line between what is genuine piety and the behavior of hypocrites. And he mentions all of it as it relates to pleasing "your Father in heaven." He says it over and over again. Jesus says,

"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."

Alms Giving

Practicing your piety. Like when you give to the poor, are you going to blow a trumpet?

"When you give," Jesus says, "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. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret."

It's the quiet Christian. The hidden one. Are you willing to give when nobody's looking? Who then is your audience? Only one. The one who looks into the heart.

"Your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

Praying

"And don't pray like the hypocrites," Jesus says, "who 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."

It's a private practice. Who is the only one who needs to experience your prayer? The one who is searching the heart.

"Your Father who is in secret," Jesus says, "and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

Fasting

It's the same with fasting.

"Do not be like the hypocrites," Jesus says, "who disfigure their faces to show others that they are fasting. They have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others."

Is your fasting an overt or covert operation? And who needs to see it anyway? Only the one who can see into the heart.

"Your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

Things Seen and Unseen

Some things will be seen, and other things will be unseen.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth," Jesus says, "where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal;

"But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Flashy, external things are a trap. Fame, material gain, power—they are fool's gold. You hold them in your hands for a few fleeting moments, but then they are gone, blown away like the dust they came from. Deep faith is a quieter affair, in which internal realities—the truth—are the real thing. Ironically, unseen things have actual substance. Genuine treasure is found in the heart. Lent has begun, and it is a time to discover God. Discovering God over the next several weeks will happen in the heart.

Ashes; a reminder that we come from dust and return to dust. Ashes on our forehead; a sign of repentance—a signal that we acknowledge our sin and come to God with a humble heart and agree to invite God's healing hand to touch our life. Who needs to see the ashes but God in heaven? The good news is that God does see the ashes, but then God carefully searches the heart to really see how forgiveness through Jesus the Christ will heal us. Amen.