

10-Feb-2016 Sermon

“Ash Wednesday”

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Texts:

- Matthew 6:1-6; 16-21
- Joel 2:1-2, 12-17;
- Psalm 51:1-17
- II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

In this homily we'll hear some suggestions as to things to give up for Lent, and other things to replace them with. Our text is from the Sermon on the Mount, specifically from the beginning of Matthew, chapter 6. But before we read that, let's look at a verse in chapter 5 that serves as an over-arching theme for much of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says to the crowds, “I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” Uh-oh. That's a problem. That's a *big* problem. That's a problem because the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were the champions of righteousness. They were the Denver Broncos of righteousness. This demand of Jesus, that our righteousness must surpass theirs, is a very tall order. And the consequences, if our righteousness does not exceed theirs, are severe: we will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

But to understand that verse, and to understand the other verse we'll be looking at today, we need to answer the questions, what is righteousness and how do we get it?

“Righteousness” is one of those funny Bible words that people don't use much outside of Church. There are the Righteous Brothers; we can informally say that something excellent is righteous, such as, “those are some righteous cookies;” and we're all familiar with the person who is “self-righteous.” But what is “righteousness?”

In the New Testament, and particularly in Matthew's gospel, “righteousness” is like clam chowder. It has two main ingredients and something that binds those two ingredients together. In clam chowder, you have clams, you have potatoes, and you have some sort of milk-based soup that provides the context for the clams and the potatoes. You have to have all three to have clam chowder.

“Righteousness” also has two main ingredients. The first is relationship with God. Without relationship with God, there's no righteousness. No relationship with God, no righteousness. This is true even though you may have the second ingredient, which is “right living.” Right living is the good fruit produced by the good tree. Right living flows from the heart in a way that is not true of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. So, for righteousness, you need relationship with God and right living. Those are like the clams and the potatoes.

Just as a side note, righteousness isn't that different from discipleship. Both are “the life-changing acknowledgement that Jesus is the One in whom God is at work” (Guelich, p. 172).

But there is one more element as well in righteousness: the thing that binds relationship with God and right living together, the thing that provides a context for them. And that thing, in the gospels—the base soup, as it were—is eschatology. Eschatology—big word, great concept—is the special working of God at the end

of time, which, according to the New Testament, began with the ministry of Jesus and continues through the present day. When Paul writes that “Today is the day of salvation,” he means that eschatologically. It is the special and new gift of God. In Matthew 6:33, Jesus says, “Seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” “All these things will be *given* to you”—that’s eschatology, the gift of God that defines the new age.

So now we know these three ingredients that make up righteousness: relationship with God; right living before God; and the new age, the end times, in which God gives us all we need in a new creation.

On to our passage. “Jesus said, ‘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.’”

This passage has to do with conduct and attitudes that I’m going to use a word to describe, a word that is familiar but one that I’m going to use in a special way. That word is “religion.” Religion. In this homily, religion is not simply belief in a god, nor an organized system of beliefs, ceremonies and rules used to worship a god. I’m using this word in a special way, although I’m not the first to use it in this way.

So what is “religion,” in this special meaning? Religion is about being seen by others and being honored by others. Jesus says, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them”—that’s the seeing part. He also says, “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.” That’s the honor part.

Religion is about *advantage* and *merit*. Advantage is something that helps make someone better or more likely to succeed than others. Gives us an edge over others. So, who are the others who might see and honor us? First of all, others *inside* our group, such as our church, or, in the case of the Pharisees, the “separated ones,” which was their name for themselves. The *hasidim*. Think of first century Judaism as a giant Monopoly game—but not a very *fun* Monopoly game—where *everyone is watching everyone else* to see who is gaining advantage. This person has cash; that person has hotels. Except the cash and the hotels are things we do for religion.

Second, those *outside* your group. It’s fun to be on the winning team, because everyone outside your team wishes they were on your team.

Third, and most importantly, God. According to this passage, good deeds, whether they are giving to the poor, or fasting, or praying—according to religion those things earn wages with God. In other words, He owes you. We would never state it so crassly, but that’s what it comes down to. He owes you a reward.

There’s one more person whose respect you may want to curry: yourself. Advantage can make you feel better about yourself. Advantage can be very empowering, and there’s nothing more intoxicating than power.

Some examples will help us better understand the concept of religion, as I’m using the word here.

- Paul says that before his conversion to Christianity, he “was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people...” (Gal 1:14).
- In Jerusalem Peter stops eating with Gentiles because he knows he will lose status with the non-

- Christian Jews, since eating with Gentiles was forbidden for Jews in the first century (Gal 2:12-14).
- The mother of the disciples James and John, comes to Jesus and asks Him to grant that her sons would sit at His right and His left in His kingdom (Mt 20:20-21). She figured that because they were disciples of the Messiah they currently had an advantage—why not press for a little greater advantage, a little greater reward?

We all want a little advantage in God's eyes and in the eyes of others. I like to look nice for church. I'm a nice Christian. We're the denomination that cares for the disadvantage and the oppressed. It's all true—I think we *are* that denomination. One trouble with advantage is that it's not incompatible with truth. The Pharisee who wants to toot his own horn when he make his gift really *is* making a gift. The one praying in the Synagogue or at the street corner hoping that others will see them really *is* praying. So seeking advantage can be done without falsehood.

If religion doesn't involve deceit, then what's so criminal about religion? It's the thought that God *does* keep score. And that we can work to *improve* our score. We can work for more honor. That when John the Baptist asks us, "Who warned *you* to flee from the coming wrath?" that we might have a strong answer. That when Jesus says to enter the kingdom of God we need to be born again, we can ask, how is that possible? How can we do it? Coach us, Jesus! Make us successful!

But what does Jesus say about our righteousness? He says "I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." That's the demand. The demand is as absolute as it is impossible. As impossible as it is absolute.

In Luke 18, a Pharisee sees a tax collector in the Temple and prays, "Thank you, God, that I'm not like that tax collector! I fast twice a week and I tithe and I read the Bible daily and I don't smoke or swear or drink to excess and I always greet newcomers when I see them in church." Meanwhile, the tax collector is praying, "Have mercy on me, a sinner. And while you're at it, have mercy on that Pharisee over there, although—as far as I can see—he doesn't have any tears in his eyes. I wonder how much he really cares about the poor or those who have no voice in our society and who seems so confident that his theology and his liturgy and his hymns are superior to those of other faith!"

How about me? I graduated from Christian graduate school. I read New Testament Greek. I know what the word "supralapsarian" means! You can't imagine how many people I've annoyed for thirty years as a result of the advantage I've sought. And maybe I didn't shout it from the mountaintops, but believe me, I let them know. And in the game of religion, the more nuanced, the more subtle, the better. A little bit of self-deprecation can go a long way toward self-advancement, religiously.

But the demand of Jesus is that our righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. And don't think we *can* beat them—that's the point of what Jesus says. The demand is as impossible as it is absolute. Even when you use as much self-deprecation as you can summon.

The Gospel *is* the only solution to this impossible, absolute demand. But let's allow the Gospel to *be* the Gospel. The Gospel is not so much an answer as it is a question—not so much a truth among other truths as it is a question mark up against all truths (Barth). It does not require us to be religious, to protect ourselves by gaining advantage over one another, because the Gospel *itself* protects us, we who represent the Gospel, just as it protects those to whom we represent it. The Gospel is the victory by which the world—including ourselves—is overcome (Barth). And, as Paul writes in the first chapter of Romans, the

Gospel is the *power of God*.

There is no power in religion, because it rests on the false premise that God keeps score. And that we can improve our score through better living or better worship or better service.

So in this season of Lent, I suggest we repent of religion. Give up religion. First, think deeply about those things we do, those things we believe, those things we see about our tradition, our church and ourselves that we believe give us an advantage. Then give them up.

If there's no power in religion, where's the power? So where is the power in this passage? The power in the sixth chapter of Matthew is farther down, and it begins with Jesus saying, "This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your name.'" The power is that we, the church, can *change eternity* through prayer. The power is that we pray to One who is called Father, namely, One who is so very close in relationship to us. The power is that we pray "Hallowed be your name," that we pray for God's reputation; that we pray that God would enter deeper into history; that we pray that God would work—but not primarily a work for us—but for Him! That *His* name would be holy. That *He* would have advantage; that He would be recognized as the *only* one who has advantage.

So in this Lenten season I would encourage you to give up religion. Give up seeking advantage in the eyes of the group, in the eyes of God, and in your own eyes. We do not need advantage. The gospel will take care of us. The gospel is the victory of God by which the world—and ourselves—are overcome. And as you give up religion, take on power. Take on the power of God and the baptism of the Holy Spirit and dare to change eternity by praying, "Our Father.... Hallowed be your name."