

**Matthew 6:1-6 (NRSV)**

"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.

---

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Many Gospel readings have the equivalent of a boulder in the road, something about the reading that is so strikingly difficult

to believe or reconcile or understand or agree with that you really can't go any further down the road to understanding until you've addressed it. The preacher may choose to clear the boulder out of the road, or climb over it or walk around it, but it isn't wise simply to ignore it, because you're likely to trip over it.

The boulder in the road in tonight's reading is the observation that a short time ago, Pastor Wendy and I put very visible marks on your foreheads – for most of you they are still there. How do those very visible marks square with the Gospel reading that tells you to “beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them?” Some of you may be planning to leave the marks of the ashes on your foreheads for a little while, and those ashes will make it pretty obvious that you've been practicing your piety this evening. So, the question is, should you scrub those marks off before you leave the building, to be consistent with the Gospel? But if you were going to do that, why put them on in the first place?

I think I've wondered about this paradox every Ash Wednesday since I started going to church many years ago but I never had anyone give me an answer I could understand until I read a commentary edited by my frequent muse, Barbara Brown Taylor.

The commentary makes the point that the ashes on our foreheads don't really announce how good and faithful and pious we are. No, the ashes are saying that we, all of us, come from dust and return to it and that in between, too often we are ruled more by the forces of death than the forces of life. We may try to give the impression that we have it all together, that we are worshipful and faithful and wise, but the ashes on our foreheads tell the true story. And the true story is that we are confused and weak, selfish and fearful and the ashes remind us of that and of how dependent we are on the grace and love of God.

A couple of years back I said something in a sermon here that wasn't so much wrong as incomplete, and it has bothered me ever since. I was asked by our Stephen Ministers whether it is ever God's will that someone should die. My answer, which had the great advantage of being very clear was, however, not very thoughtful – my answer was, “No, it is never God's will that someone should die.” Now, it is scarcely ever a good idea to stand up here declare what God's will is. But I was angry that week. A young man had taken his own life and it seemed such a waste and a tragedy, and I didn't want to stand up here and say that it might have been God's will for him. In fact, I still don't think that his death was God's will. But as I reflect on my experiences here, the answer should have been a little more nuanced, a little more thoughtful than it was.

Frankly, I don't know whether God wills the death of any of us. But it is certainly true that God's creation provides for – in fact, insists on – the death of *all* of us. The death rate is what it has always been – 100% – and that's a thing worth remembering on this night that is the darkest night of the Christian year.

When I gave my answer that God doesn't will the death of anyone, I think I was really reflecting my own fears about pain and about death. Death, for me, is the hardest part about being a pastor. As I've become part of our little tribe here, I've come to know each of you and I confess that when you hurt, I hurt, too. I wish that weren't so, but it is. We've experienced a fair number of deaths lately, deaths really close to home, people we know and love or close relatives of people we know and love and it hurts.

And death is a hurt that I can't take away, that I can't brush away and say, well, this is something we can learn from, that God loves us and works for our good, and that the sun will come up tomorrow, even though all those things are true. The sun *will* come up tomorrow, but when someone you love passes on, they

won't be with you any more in quite the same way and it will hurt today and tomorrow, too, maybe a little less than today, but it will still hurt, probably for lots of days to come.

So what *can* we say? First, we can say that we know that we aren't really able to make anyone's pain go away, but that the pain does go away or at least it becomes manageable. God does the healing, in God's time, through God's means. You can know, you should know, that others in your faith community here can and do share your pain, but it is God who brings the healing.

Second, we can't see the ashes on our own foreheads, only on others. So we know that this sign of who we are and what we are really like and how much we need a savior is a thing that we all share and we all confess. Death is our common fate, but that is not the only thing we have in common. God may not will the death of any of us, but God wills the eventual death of all of us and God will be with us before, during and after.

Third, in the meantime, we should "choose life" as God tells us for ourselves and for others. We should choose life that is rich and vital and full as we can make it, life in community, life in God's extended family, life in truth and faith.

Death is not the great enemy. Death does not ruin life, death *completes* life. Lives can be damaged, people can be hurt by selfishness, by greed, by thoughtlessness and sin, and when these things happen, our enemy is that same old devil that we've met and entertained or fought against all our lives. But that old devil does not have the final word. The final word that redeems us belongs to Christ and that word is a word of comfort and joy, love and hope.

Ash Wednesday is the darkest day of the Christian year, a day on which we put ashes on our foreheads, not to proclaim our

piety but rather our poverty; not to declare our faith but rather our fecklessness; not to boast of our self-sufficiency but rather our utter dependence on God. If you want to show off your ashes, then you really should probably wash them off because what they say about us is not really something we should be very proud of. But these ashes say honestly who we are and where start from as we begin our Lenten journey and those are good things to know.

Amen.