

A Ash Wednesday 2.26.20

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-20

Focus Statement: Breath, you're mortal.

Don't be like the hypocrites, Jesus announces in our Gospel reading for Ash Wednesday.

And if you are, like me, a bit of a rule follower, this pronouncement might have been met with a bit of relief. After all, Jesus is not generally one for clearly spelling out behavior. So to have a very clear, "see those guys, don't do that," for once is refreshing. But then that begs the question. What is a hypocrite? Who are we not supposed to be like?

Maybe you're familiar with the old Sunday school song, "I just wanna be a sheep, ba-ba-ba-ba, I just wanna be a sheep, ba-ba-ba-ba," which includes the verse, "I don't wanna be a hy-po-crite, I don't wanna be a hy-po-crite. Well, why not? 'Cause they're not hip with it. I just wanna be a sheep, ba-ba-ba-ba." I looked up hypocrite and, no joke, the dictionary definition of a hypocrite is "someone who indulges in hypocrisy." Nothing like defining a word with the word. Hypocrite is one of those words where we're not really sure what it is, but we know we don't want to be one. But I feel like if we had a children's sermon today and I asked the kids what the word "hypocrite" meant, after the blank stares, I'd get something about being a liar or being fake. A hypocrite is someone who's words and actions don't match up, who pretends to live by some strict moral code, but who in fact believe very differently.

At least, this is the modern definition of a hypocrite. Remember the fun with words we had on Sunday with the word "awful." Well, I dug into the word hypocrite as well, and the Greek word used here, "hupo-kritai," can also be translated as "stage actors." "hupo" for

the preposition “under,” and “kritai” “discriminate or distinguish”, to be a hypocrite is literally to “play a part.”

So the pronouncement Jesus gives us here is less about action and more about intention. The question isn't what, but why. Why are you giving alms, why are you practicing prayer, why are you fasting? What is the goal, what is the motivation, behind these actions?

This text from Matthew is the text every year on Ash Wednesday. And while you all certainly know I don't always understand the lectionary committee's decisions on text, for this one I think they were right on because I think these are really important questions to ground ourselves in as we enter into Lent, a season seemingly dedicated to almsgiving, prayer, fasting, and other acts of piety. It is good to ask the question, why are we doing these things? What is the motivation behind our Lenten practices?

This is also an especially good question for us who identify as Lutherans, as “practicing our piety before others” is really the last thing we are interested in doing. At council last week, we were working on a questionnaire about Trinity's ministries and one of the questions was about how well we prepare members to share their faith. And someone quipped, “just say ‘we're Lutheran.’” The implication being that to be Lutheran means to be private about our faith, so much so that we maybe take too seriously Jesus' proclamation that our faith be done “in secret; [so that our] Father who sees in secret will reward” us. All this, of course, on a day in which we mark ourselves, very publicly, with an ashy cross in the center of our foreheads. So what are we doing?

I was talking to someone the other day about interviews, and she remarked how strange it is that we tend to hire not the most qualified person, but the most confident. Interviewing well and being good at one's job can be completely different skill sets. And let's not even get started on the carefully curated world of social media. Point being, playing a part, being a hypocrite in the ancient Greek stage actor definition of the word, is part of what it means to be a person in our society. If someone asks, "how are you," unless you know the person really, really well, "fine" or "good" is probably going to be the answer, right? And talking about why we don't talk about our faith, have you ever looked at someone and thought, they are a way better Christian than I am, their faith is so much stronger, better, deeper, insert adjective here, than mine... The struggle is real, am I right?

So here's the gift, dear people of God. Here's the good news. The season of Lent is an invitation to put aside judgment, to lay down our self-criticism, to stop worrying about whether or not we measure up, and to simply be in the presence of God. What Jesus calls us to in this request to not be like the hypocrites is not a call to some stricter level of piety, but the offering of the freedom that comes from knowing yourself to be enough. On Ash Wednesday we remember that we are mortal, that we are human, that we were formed from the mud and the muck and the mire of creation. To be mortal is to be broken, to be sinful, to fall short. It's part of the thing, to pretend otherwise is an act.

And so friends, in a few moments, we will join together in a long period of confession. We will be invited to lay before God our failure to love, our unfaithfulness, pride, hypocrisy, our

self-indulgence, our negligence, our neglect, our waste. We are invited to bring all of this to God, and in its place to receive this cross of ashes. These ashes are not a mark of your sinfulness however, they are a mark of your redemption. On this day we in the church make visible to remind not others but ourselves of the promise that we always carry on our foreheads, the promise that we are sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ. That we are loved, forgiven, redeemed, and set free by the love of God in Christ, because love and forgiveness are who God is. This cross of ash is meant to remind us that we are not acting as forgiven people, we are forgiven people. God's mercy is great, and we are God's beloved. Amen.