

Righteousness or Self-righteousness?

ASH WEDNESDAY
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Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

When I was a child, Lutherans never received ashen crosses on their foreheads on Ash Wednesday. Yet my Catholic classmates came to school with ashes on their foreheads. So, I'd ask my mom, "*Why do they receive ashes and we don't?*" My mom simply said, "*We are not Catholic!*" And that was that! Did she consider the practice to be one of righteousness? Or was it self-righteousness? Or perhaps she thought it was works-righteousness. If so, it wasn't Lutheran!

Why do we receive them now? There is some history behind the practice although Luther is somewhat ambivalent about it. It originally stemmed from Old Testament traditions. Ashes were historically used as a sign of mourning, humiliation, and repentance. A humbled Job says to the Lord, "*I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes*" (Job 42:6). Mordecai tears his clothes and puts on sackcloth and ashes when he learns Haman gave orders to have all the Jews killed. (Esther 4:1). Daniel prays, fasts, puts on sackcloth and ashes when he learns that the devastation of Jerusalem must be fulfilled. (Daniel 9:3.) More familiar to us is the Genesis 3:19 text. The Lord responds to Adam's disobedience saying, "*By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken. You are dust and to dust you shall return.*"

The early church in the 4th century used ashes for public penance, especially for who sought readmission to the church. In the 6th century, the practice evolved from a penalty for serious sins to a symbolic act for the entire congregation marking the 40-day season of Lent. Pope Urban II in 1091, authorized the use of ashes on Ash Wednesday. The palm branches blessed from the previous Palm Sunday were burned to make the ashes. The priest imposed the ashes on the forehead, saying, "*Remember, O man, that thou art dust, and to dust thou shalt return,*" or "*Repent, and believe in the Gospel.*" Following the Reformation, the use of ashes fell out of favor in many Protestant denominations, and the practice was banned in England in 1549 and revived in the 19th century. As a result of the ecumenical movement in the 20th century, and liturgical reforms following Vatican II, the ritual saw a resurgence. Many mainline Protestant denominations, including Methodists, Lutherans, and Presbyterians, reintroduced the imposition of ashes as a meaningful devotional practice.

But for some of us the question remains: is this practice righteousness or self-righteousness? I would say it all depends on one's heart. If we wear the ashes as a sign of our own piety that calls attention to our spirituality; if it calls attention to ourselves; or if it becomes a way to prove we are righteous, then it is self-righteousness. But if our lives are marked by humility, simplicity, compassion, caring, and love, the cross on our foreheads becomes a gentle reminder that we are dedicated to Christ, that we are mortal sinners in need of God's grace; and that it is about Jesus whose life and death was for others.

Jesus spoke about righteousness. You will recall throughout February our lessons have focused on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Jesus begins with those who are blessed followed by "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness.*" And then Jesus goes on to say, "*For I tell you, unless your righteous-ness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*" In today's gospel reading, again Jesus focuses on righteousness saying, "*Beware of practicing your righteousness before others.*"

So, what does Jesus mean by righteousness? And how might we avoid using the practices of Lent as self-righteousness. For the Christian, righteousness is often viewed in two ways. First, it has to do with having a right relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. And second, it is the ongoing process of living out that faith ethically and obediently in accordance with God's holy nature. But, "*Beware!*" Jesus warns us. We are not to draw attention to ourselves when we give to others, pray for others, or fast.

It might be helpful to ask ourselves three questions: First, is my giving a *charade or is it charity*. Am I giving out of self-interest? Or is my donating helping others and pleasing God? Almsgiving had deep roots in Israel's life. While enslaved, the Israelites learned through their own poverty the importance of giving to the needy. They also knew that their origin and life were rooted in God's grace. Upholding the law, they made provision for the needy by contributing a full tithe of every third year's produce to their community's "food bank." As a result, not even a sojourner would go hungry. Care for the poor, the homeless, the fatherless, widows, orphans, and strangers in their midst were hallmarks of Israel's faith. Jesus insists that his followers continue the practice of giving. But he warns that pride can get in the way. Giving is not a competition for a prize or for public esteem. Instead concern for others is to be our motivation rather than prestige and praise.

Second question to ask ourselves: are my prayers *pretense or prayer*. Personal and corporate prayer are to be honest, humble expressions of faith. They are to reflect both the difference between God and humankind. In other words, we are to communicate intimately to our good, heavenly Father as a child would to a parent, as reflected in the Lord's Prayer. Prayers become an act of self-promotion when they are narcissistic, extolling one's self-worth. Then they become a misuse of prayer. So, Jesus says, pray in secret. In doing so, we become free of such temptation. However, the place is not the central issue here. The point Jesus is making is that what matters is the nature and character of those who pray. Righteous prayer is God- and community-centered, not self-centered.

Third question should we choose to fast is: Is my fasting *flaunting or fasting*? While fasts may require restraint from eating or some other activity we enjoy, the practice may feed a person's pride and self-interest. For example, we don't fast in order to lose weight. The ancient ritual of fasting always included prayer and was typically associated with mourning and penance. It was an act of personal and corporate humbling. Humility and repentance though were not always the driving forces behind fasts. Fasts could be susceptible to sin's perverting power. The pretense of humility and repentance was unbecoming of the people of God. The driving value behind fasting isn't self-centeredness which seeks to "*be praised*" and "*seen.*" It isn't a show. It is a profound act of worshipful self-control aimed at solidarity with God and neighbor. I like to think of fasting as giving up something that provides more time for God or community with others.

So, in summing this all up. The ashen cross that is applied to your foreheads or hands is a sign of righteous devotion to Christ. It is a humbling reminder of our sinfulness and mortality. On the one hand we have the joy of the palms on Palm Sunday and the promise of deliverance. On the other hand, we have an ancient sign of repentance and humility.

What does righteousness look like? It is paying attention to the kingdom of heaven present among us. It a return to God in the kinds of practices that strengthen our relationship to him. Lenten practices are not merely individualistic done for our own spiritual lives. They are also outward focused toward God and others. If we can remember this as we engage in our

Lenten disciplines, they will become a sign of righteousness instead of self-righteousness. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses a group of disciples and listeners, including us. He tells us it's not only how we follow Him, but how we are going to be with each other.

How is Jesus calling us to be distinctive in our community as his followers? How is God empowering us to uplift our community toward a higher sort of presence in the world. What kinds of practices is God calling each one of us to engage in during Lent? Ash Wednesday is the beginning of a journey to return to God in the kinds of practices that maintain and strengthen that relationship. It's God saying, *"I want you to return to me."* And to his words of love we respond: *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain in me a willing spirit.* When it comes down to it, the treasure of heaven is love.

Jesus walks down from the mountain and loves his enemies. Jesus absorbs violence, rather than returning it. Jesus forgives from a cross and enters the dust of death. Christ does not merely diagnose our misdirected loves, he becomes our treasure, a treasure that cannot be consumed by moth or rust. It doesn't depend on applause; or defeat of an enemy to survive. It enters the dust... and rises. And where that treasure is, there our heart can finally be reshaped. Not anxious, brittle, nor defensive, but free. Free to give without being seen, to pray without performing, to love without winning. Remember you are dust and you belong to the One who meets you there.

In Jesus' name, amen.