

Though the Crop Is Small and Wretched

Ash Wednesday--Matt 6:1-6, 16-21

I don't know if this thought has crossed your mind, but what we're doing here today is a bit of an oxymoron. Jesus' whole message in our gospel reading is summed up in its first line: "beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them." So almost immediately after reading and preaching this passage, we smudge a big cross in the middle of our foreheads and head out into the world. It's the only time in the whole church year that we do something to our bodies which announces our faith in such an obvious, visible way...right after being warned not to practice that faith in order to be seen. Nice!

Well, we could argue that Ash Wednesday's odd juxtaposition of these words and this ritual actually reminds us that Jesus is not criticizing public religious practice itself. Rather he's criticizing such practice *for the purpose of being acknowledged and celebrated by others*. In other words, it's not giving to the poor or fasting or praying that's the issue. It's letting everybody know you're doing these things by blowing a trumpet or looking pale and gaunt on purpose. So it's the underlying motive that Jesus is trying to address: is there a genuine desire to be in communication with God, or is acting religious all about the power and kudos we get from other people?

But even here, I suspect, most of us still stand convicted. For the more I think about my motivations for doing good things, the more confused those motivations seem to me. I used to fast one day a week and then contribute what I would have spent on lunch to charitable causes. I didn't contort my face and make a big deal out of it. But I didn't hide what I was doing either. To be honest, it felt good to write checks to "Feed the Children" or "Katrina Relief" or whoever, and it felt good to let people know about what I was doing. What, then, were my real motives for this act of piety? Probably a mix: one part earnest search to connect with God and God's special care for the world's vulnerable, one part proud and self-congratulatory desire to be seen by others.

As Christians we all want to practice our religion with a right spirit. None of us wants to

become the kind of hypocrites that Jesus criticizes in our gospel reading. So what do we do with this secret desire to be recognized and admired by others that messes up our motives? For questions like these, I take a lot of comfort and direction from a group of mystics known as the Desert Fathers. These were fourth-century Christians who watched the church become absorbed into the Roman state and wanted no part of it. They saw how the church's rituals and buildings took on the showy, militaristic grandiosity of empire, and they were so disgusted that they fled out into the desert to become hermits and seek God's will in prayer, fasting, and almsgiving (three activities traditionally associated with Lent). These early monastics were vigilant in their pursuit of Christian righteousness and radical in their dedication to living out the gospel. Here is an example: "One of the monks, called Serapion, sold his book of the Gospels and gave the money to those who were hungry, saying: I have sold the book which told me to sell all that I had and give to the poor!"^[i] If anyone could advise on how to deal with impure motives, these folks could.

But these desert monks were also deeply practical. They addressed the issue raised by our gospel today, this issue of mixed motivation for our good works, with this wonderful vignette:

A Brother said to Abbot Pastor: If I give one of my brothers a little bread or something of the sort, the demons spoil everything and it seems to me that I have acted only to please men. The elder said to him: Even if your good work was done to please, we must still give to our brothers what they need. And he told him this story. Two farmers lived in a village. One of them sowed his field and reaped only a small and wretched crop. The other neglected to sow anything at all, and so he reaped nothing. Which of the two will survive, if there is a famine? The brother replied: The first one, even though his crop is small and wretched. The elder said to him: Let us also sow, even though our sowing is small and wretched, lest we die in the time of hunger.^[ii]

So maybe there is no real answer to this problem of compromised motives. Maybe it is just a human fact with which we must live. And maybe, as Abbot Pastor suggests in this story, getting too caught up in worrying about this kind of sin is itself a problem because it prevents us from continuing to practice the generosity and care for others to which our faith calls us. The point is not that we shouldn't try to cultivate a humble spirit. It's just that what we *do* still matters, even if our

motives for doing it are mixed.

Jesus himself actually implies this point at the end of today's gospel passage when he talks about the importance of storing up treasure in heaven instead of on earth "where moth and rust consume." In order *not* to store up treasure on earth, of course, we have to give that treasure away and thus live out our faith tangibly in our actions. Our passage from Isaiah today makes the point even more clear, as God tells the Israelites that God has refused to respond to their fasting and prayers because those prayers have not been accompanied by ethical behavior. "The fast that I choose," God reminds them, is "to loose the bonds of injustice," "to share your bread with the hungry," and to "bring the homeless poor into your house."

This Lent such a call comes to us even more urgently as the circle of those losing their jobs or their homes or just struggling to make ends meet widens further into our community and our church family. We are living in difficult times. So whatever hypocrisies we are guilty of in the practice of our faith, let us not allow them to keep us from practicing that faith anyway. For the Ash Wednesday message for us in this time and place seems clear: pray, fast, and give--humbly if you can, hypocritically if you must--for the crop you raise, no matter how small and wretched, still feeds the hungry.

[i] From Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, New York: New Directions, 1960, pg 37.

[ii] *Ibid.* pg. 51.