

I read of a pastor, who confessedly tells that he is not the neatest person in the world, but discovered his daughter was on the way to becoming an even messier housekeeper than he. His approach was always to come at a problem not only with both self-confession and identification but with a bit of humor. When she came home from school one day, he caught her as she walked in the door and said, "I have bad news and good news. The bad news is that we were broken into today. The good news is that they only ransacked one room, throwing clothes, hangers, books, plates, papers all over the floor. They only ransacked one room—yours." As a teenager is likely to do, she rolled her eyes and went off to her room to clean it. As a good example, he went to his office to straighten things up as well. In many ways, that is what the Lenten season is about. It is about cleaning up our closets and our rooms. It is forty days of a progressive reevaluation and restructuring. We clean up our closets and rooms in preparation for presenting a clean house, or in the more biblical expression, a clean temple. If we use that as the basis for understanding this passage and for viewing what we are doing here on this Wednesday then we can begin a very important journey toward a spiritual wholeness. In our gospel reading, Jesus says, "Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others." That seems to contradict our actions on Ash Wednesday. We come here and have ashes on our foreheads then head out to lunch, to pick up groceries, or to visit a loved one. Sometimes it is hard to put our practices next to the scriptures and have it make sense, but it does.

Let's imagine this scene. Jesus has called the great multitude of people who were following him to an expansive rise of land near the Sea of Galilee. There was a reason for this. The area, given the right wind, acted like an amplifier for someone speaking. In that mass of people there would be common people of the time: rabbis, religious leaders, Pharisees and Sadducees. His words, deeds, and actions drew people to him. According to the scripture, he drew a multitude of people across socio-economic strata. As the Word of God intended, it struck the hearts of the hearers in extremely personal ways. The Mt. of the Beatitudes is a wonderful place to examine our hearts & lives.

To one side of him there would have been a group of fishermen, to another direction a group of merchants, and further back there would have been religious leaders seeking to judge the words and teachings of this young rabbi. They would have been there not for impious reasons, but for the reason that any pastor would listen to the messages of a preacher that was drawing the attention of his own flock. They would have been there to hear and assess. It was their role to protect their sheep.

Jesus used many common and historical teachings of Judaism for that time period. They heard little that they could argue with. The younger rabbis would have turned to their teachers and said things like, his teachings are true, are they not, Rabbi? The old man would pull on his beard, giving an earnest thoughtful look then nod his head slowly up and down. The old rabbi would be waiting for this new teacher to snare himself. Instead, Jesus continued his discourse. He told them the type of person who was blessed. He told them how to respond to the law. He told the people that murder occurs first in the heart.

Then Jesus gave instructions on what the crowd must do to be perfect as God is perfect. As the old saying goes, he went from preaching to meddling in the eyes of the religious leaders. Once he began to strip away the masks, hearts moved closer or further away. Each person would have known what Jesus meant by a mask. They had seen Greek plays in some form. The audience's minds would go back to that strong visual. They would be remembering the actors who wore masks to hide who they were. One man could have played several parts in a play and he would need a mask to differentiate the characters. The actor used a mask to display the emotions attached to his character's lines. Masks hid the true nature of the speaker. With one word, hypocrite, Jesus had created an image for each hearer of a man behind a mask pretending to be something he wasn't. Most people listening would have known who Jesus was talking about. They would have shot quick glances toward the religious leaders in their long robes adorned with bright colors and symbols. The crowd would easily see that Jesus was saying not to display a false piety. Jesus was telling them to not try and impress the person next to you with how righteous or holy you are. That would be very freeing for the average working-class person.

Working-class people would have looked on every religious leader and felt vastly inferior. They would have seen a Sadducee in the synagogue, parading toward the offering plate, dropping in large bags of money. Working folk would have seen the Pharisee standing on the corner, praying, lifting his hands to heaven. They saw how the pious acted and it was a good example of what the working-class wasn't and could never be righteous, as righteous as the religious leaders.

When Jesus said, "Don't be a hypocrite," he struck a chord in the hearts of that fisherman, that woman struggling to feed her family and not able to give large sums of money, that simple farmer or that tent maker. But it also struck a chord with the Pharisees and the religious leaders. That young rabbi would have turned to his teacher, his mentor, and whispered, "Is he talking about us? Are we being hypocrites? Am I wearing a mask?"

On the other side of the venerable rabbi, possibly, stood a Pharisee who had been fasting. Everyone knew he was fasting. Everyone knew he was pious because he made sure everyone knew he was fasting and very pious. Jesus possibly set his eyes on the old man when he said that fasting should be done as a private event. Don't look like your fasting. Appear as if you're not because fasting is for your personal approach to a holier life, not for others to see and say, "What a holy man he is."

These religious leaders were storing up their treasures here on earth, literally. None of what they did was lasting before God. None of God's good will was gained by their sacrifices or their suffering. They weren't cleaning their rooms. Instead they were shoving everything into the closet, spraying the room with an air freshener and saying it was all done. Making matters even worse, they were saying for others to do it like them.

In the same way, putting a cross of ashes on your forehead is not cleaning your room. Ashes on your forehead are recognizing that there is a need to start cleaning. Lent is a journey of spiritual renewal. Putting ashes on your forehead should be a sign, not to others, but to the person in the mirror that we are taking the first step. Or as hollow as the man who lived anything but a righteous life, but would go to church early in the day to get his ashes, then parade around at work so all could see what a righteous man he was. In both cases, they wore the mask of righteousness but never experienced the meaning or the reality that their spiritual journey of renewal was starting at the moment.

Then why do this? Why take a visible and outward sign and display it before the world? That's the answer right there. We do it not for the world to see. We do it not to prove how righteous or religious we are. We do it because we know we are sinners. We do it because we know Jesus is the cure for our sin problem. We do it because we want to look in the mirror and see a man or woman who has made that first conscious step towards the renewing our minds and spirits. We do it to make a difference in our lives, to make a difference in the lives around us. It is a pact with the Lord that reminds us and us only that the journey has begun. Ashes are a wonderful symbol of this because ashes throughout scripture were used to indicate repentance, a change of mind, a change of direction and a change of heart. Ashes are not the end all of why you are here. Ashes are the beginning of your Lenten journey of renewal.

Amen.