

# ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

**Ash Wednesday • February 14, 2018**

**Isaiah 58:1-12 • Psalm 51:1-17 • 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 • Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

“Beware of practicing your piety before others,” Jesus says. Beware of how you give money to the poor. Beware of how you pray. And beware of how you fast. Do not blow trumpets. Do not contort your face. Do not stand and pray on the street corners.

What Jesus warns against, of course, is not giving money to the poor. Or praying. Or fasting. What Jesus warns against is piety. And not just piety in general but a very specific kind of piety. Reverence or respect for God that comes not from love of God but from a desire to be respected, liked, even admired by other people. A desire to be seen or known as someone devoted to God. The problem with pietists isn't that they do the wrong things. The problem is that they do all the right things but they do them for all the wrong reasons. The pietists pray, but only where others can hear them. The pietists give to the poor, but only where others can see them. The pietists fast, but only so others will notice them.

It's easy to scoff at such piety. Call it what you want. Sanctimonious. Smug. Holier-than-thou. And whenever someone expresses their faith in a way you don't particularly care for, it's easy to tell them to go into their room and shut the door. But talk to the ones praying on the street corners and blowing trumpets in the soup kitchen and you'll notice they all have something in common. Not holiness. Not devotion. Not dedication. Not reverence. But fear. A need for validation. A little voice in the back of their heads telling them that they're not quite as devoted as they should be. That they're not giving as much to the poor as they really could be. You'll find a quiet but deeply lodged fear that God doesn't actually accept them as they are. And if they can't trust that God accepts them as they are, then at least they can be accepted by other people.

Because God doesn't give out prizes for piety. But people do. And those are the ones you really want anyway, because you can put them on a shelf. You can list them on a resume. You can humblebrag to your friends about getting burned out from too much devotion to God. And if all these people think I'm doing a good job, then God must think so too. If my devotion is endearing me to all these people, it must be endearing me to God too.

Lent offers no shortage of opportunities for acts of such piety. No shortage of chances to announce your devotion to God. To proclaim that you are turning away from your sin by reading scripture more. Or to announce that you are reminding yourself of your mortality by giving up chocolate. Ash Wednesday itself seems tailor made for such piety. A day to walk around with a cross on your forehead. To be seen and recognized as a person of faith. It's surprising we don't have more midnight masses on Ash Wednesday so people can get the entire twenty-four hours to wear a cross on their foreheads.

And that emphasis on personal devotion is the way Lent is celebrated in many of our churches. Lent is a time to take stock of your sinfulness. To repent. To make a concerted effort to bring yourself closer to God. So that when Jesus is raised on Easter you'll be prepared. Because if you do the right stuff during Lent, then you'll be the right kind of person by the time Easter comes around. Hopefully, you'll be acceptable to God, and if you impress some of your neighbors along the way, all the better.

But here's the thing. Most of us entered here tonight with ashes on our foreheads already. Some of us are carrying more ashes than others. Some of us are living with sickness. Others of us are struggling with addiction. Some of us are looking for a sign of validation or care from anyone who will give it to us. Many of us are dealing with griefs other people keep tell us we should have gotten over by now. And most of us are dealing with sorrows that only we know.

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And Lord knows we see ashes all around us. Ashes on the sidewalk by another terrorist attack. Ashes on the shag carpet of another home that's been torn apart by abuse. Ashes on the tiles of another elementary school classroom that's been shot up.

One of my colleagues recently described how his thinking on Ash Wednesday and Lent changed. How he no longer saw it as a time for personal devotion and piety. No longer a time to repent and bring ourselves closer to God for a few weeks. And how Ash Wednesday stopped being a day to pretend to face our own frailty. And the day that changed everything for him was September 11, 2001.

Because he served a congregation in midtown Manhattan and when people tried to get away from the towers, they started walking over the bridges or heading uptown. And by the time they got to midtown, enough of the smoke and debris had cleared that they could go inside the church and try to take stock of what was happening. Where they could go. Where their loved ones were. And everyone who came through the doors of the church looked the same. Because their faces were covered in ash.

And the first thing they did when they came in the church, almost instinctively, was go to the font. And reach down into the water with their hands cupped and splash the water on their face to get rid of the ashes. All day, people one after the other came in, washing themselves in the font. And by the end of the day, by the time the sun had set and everyone had left the church to continue on their pilgrimage home, or wherever home was now, you couldn't see the water in the font. Because it was covered in such a thick layer of ash.

The ashes that we put on one another's foreheads in a few minutes are not merely a reminder of our own sinfulness and fragility. Most of us already know that. These ashes are marked on our foreheads as a cross to remind us that, in Christ, God shares in our sorrows.

Lent is not a time for spiritual discipline. Or piety. Or to recommit to your New Year's Resolutions. Lent doesn't ask us to pretend. Lent is the story of our lives. It's the Ordinary Time that we all live in. Walking with Jesus toward the cross and the life God promises us lies on the other side of it.

So if you want a Lenten practice, if your Lent won't be complete unless you have something to do, let me give you a pastoral suggestion. Whenever you come into or leave this space, take a finger and dip it in the font. And make the sign of the cross on your forehead. And remember your baptism. Because in baptism God grafts us into Christ. So in baptism, everything that is yours has become Christ's and everything that was Christ's has become yours. Christ shares in our death so that we can share in his resurrection.

You are dust, yes. But you are more than that. Because in your baptism, you are part of the body of Christ. And Christ shares in our death, takes on the ashes of our despair, so we can share in his new life.

New life in the forgiveness of sins. New life in the breaking of the bread. And new life in the waters of baptism. Those waters that are covered with our ashes.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor