

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
Ash Wednesday – March 5, 2025  
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

The passage we just heard from Matthew's Gospel is a portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. This section of the Gospel – three chapters – is less like a sermon than a collection of teachings. Many people regard the Sermon on the Mount as the heart of Matthew's Gospel. Jesus' teachings are very challenging and very powerful.

On Ash Wednesday, as we begin the season of Lent, we read the portion of the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus teaches about three central practices of Christian faith – giving money to the poor, prayer, and fasting. Jesus supports all of these practices, in his teaching and his life. But he warns the people who are listening to him that these practices can be distorted by human self-interest, that they may be done for the benefit of other people instead of for God. He challenges anyone who practices piety “before others in order to be seen by them” to a radical reorientation, from a focus on other people to a focus on God.

Three times Jesus warns his hearers not to be hypocrites. The Gospels make it very clear that Jesus was really impatient with hypocrisy. What we do must come from the heart, from within. We must strive for integrity of thought and action. Our religious practices are to come out of our relationship with God, from a place of humility before God and of gratitude to God. We are meant to give to the poor as an act of compassion and justice that comes out of our faith in God who is compassionate and who desires the welfare of all people. Prayer – our openness to God – is meant to change us and transform us into beings who more and more resemble the image of God in which we were created. And as that transformation occurs, our lives will be lived differently, from a God-center. When we fast from food or drink, we refrain for a time from self-indulgent consumption. Fasting is part of living a life of greater justice, a life in which we choose to limit the amount of our resources devoted to ourselves so that we can devote more of our resources to others.

Our piety, the religious expression of our faith in God, has gone wrong when we do what we do to impress other people. Another danger that religious people need to be aware of is self-deception. This is a danger especially for people like us – the relatively small group of people in the church who attend the Ash Wednesday service – to think we are more righteous than we really are. The Prayer Book service for Ash Wednesday gives us a screaming warning not to “go there.” We must also be on the lookout for any tendency we have to be like the Pharisee in the temple who was proud of his exemplary religious life and regarded the humble and penitent tax collector who stood near him with contempt. As Jesus taught, “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 18:9-14).

Today's Gospel lesson ends with a warning about our relationship to our possessions. As Jesus says, our possessions are vulnerable to decay and loss. And if we devote ourselves to possessions, if we anxiously strive to have more and more, we risk our hearts. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). Once again, Jesus challenges us to reorient our lives, away from worldly concerns and toward God. Jesus says we should store up treasures for ourselves in heaven. The Jews who were listening to Jesus would have understood that charitable giving to those in need was a vital part of storing up treasures in heaven. People who have put possessions in the right place in their lives are free to be generous with others. People who recognize that life and all its blessings are gifts from God are free to be generous with the gifts they have been given, in gratitude to God and from a conviction that God wants justice for all God's people.

Never forget the words of the prophet Micah, a short sentence, easy to memorize (6:8): "God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

In a few minutes we will be reminded of our mortality. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." The time of our life on earth is limited. And so, the time to repent and re-orient our lives is now. May our lives be ever more oriented to love in action and justice in action and may God help each of us to keep a holy season of Lent. In Jesus' name. Amen.