

SERMON: Church of the Holy Spirit, Wayland, MA – February 17, 2010

Sermon for Ash Wednesday – Church of the Holy Spirit, Wayland – The Rev. Dr. Frederick P. Moser, Rector

The Ash Wednesday gospel itself comes from a sermon – from the middle of the Gospel of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount. Basically, it is a sermon about how to make your life more God-centered and less self-centered. Jesus has just finished telling his listeners to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors. It is easy, he says, to love your neighbors, and wish good on your friends and those to whom you are close. But, the world isn’t populated only with our friends and neighbors – people like us, and we and our friends and neighbors are no more entitled to God’s blessings than everyone else. God makes the sun shine on the evil and the good alike, Jesus says, and sends the same rain on the righteous and unrighteous. The Sermon on the Mount calls us to a holistic view of the world, a view of the world as God sees it rather than how we tend to see it when left to our own devices. The world is ultimately one, the gospel proclaims. So, the moral question is how are we going to live holistically in it.

From this teaching Jesus moves to the seminal verse of our Ash Wednesday gospel: “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them.”

Especially since the nineteenth century “piety has gotten something of a bad name. We have come to think of “piety” mostly as having to do with personal, private religion – spirituality, prayer, meditation, and things like that, as if those practices could take us out of the world where we live – become a kind of refuge from the world. The description of something as “pietistic” often has a pejorative meaning to us, meaning a practice that is devout and spiritual but impractical. But, the word in the gospel is richer than this, and it has a much more holistic meaning. “Piety” in Matthew means “righteous deeds,” “works of justice.” Beware of doing God’s work – righteous deeds and works of justice – Jesus says here, so that others will notice *you* rather than *those* on whose behalf God calls you to work – primarily in the gospel writer’s minds, of course, the poor. Piety in the gospel thus has all to do with connecting practical, worldly work with work for God; for the gospel writers it means making more of our work God’s work for justice and righteousness, and less of it, in the end, for our selves alone.

The Sermon thus presents us with a vexing question with which to wrestle in Lent: Why? Why are we doing what we are doing? What are our motivations; whom are we really serving, how much is it really costing us, and how is our work drawing us closer to, or driving us farther from, God? The gospel presents three specific practices, cases in point, as examples of things that can either draw us closer to God or drive us farther away, depending on how and why we do them: giving offerings, praying, and fasting. Some hard questions could quickly come to mind. Suppose we couldn’t deduct our offerings on our tax returns. Would they be the same? For whom, honestly, are most of our prayers? How many of us fasted today? And yet, the invitation to Lent that we will hear in just a few minutes invites us to think about some of these same practices: “self-examination and repentance, prayer, fasting and self-denial, and reading and meditating on God’s Word.” How do we do them? Do we do them? And, why; for whom will we do them?

Ash Wednesday orients us back to God. It is an invitation to reconnect with God. It calls us to examine our motives, and put them in the wider perspective of God's mission in the world. It is an invitation, in a helpful way, to get our selves out of the way so that God can become the way. "Where your treasure is," the gospel says, "there will your heart be also." What are you going to treasure these next forty days, at least, and how, why, and for whom will you treasure it? Responding to these questions in the terms of your own life is what Lent is all about.