

ASH WEDNESDAY Practicing Your Piety

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Dr. Douglas A. Learned

Wednesday, March 9, 2011

Communion at 7 p.m. in the sanctuary

David Brooks had an interesting column in the *New York Times* this week entitled, "The New Humanism." In it he wrote about how many important public policies implemented for the sake of domestic or international good have had at their center, as he puts it, a "reliance on an overly simplistic view of human nature."

"We have," he writes, "a prevailing view in our society—not only in the policy world, but in many spheres—that we are divided creatures. Reason, which is trustworthy, is separate from emotions, which are suspect. Society progresses to the extent that reason can suppress the passions."¹

He notes that an increasing number of researchers across many fields of study are taking a fresh look at how our unconscious motivations, emotions, and societal dispositions shape not only how we desire to live, but also how we actually live. The 20th century was one in which we placed a high value on the ideal of rational thinking, but it was also a time in which the presumption of reason as master over emotion was severely tested, to which numerous wars and domestic conflicts attested, and as current events cause us to ponder even more.

Brook's article caused me to reflect on how we, as Christians, are called to integrate the various aspects of our personality, character, and decision making on our journey of faith, which is traveled through real circumstances and challenges and, as they say, "in real time." I find myself asking, how does God shape and define humanity, and maybe even more, how do we seek to define and shape our lives for God?

In my journey with God so far, and in my reading of Scripture such as the passage in Matthew 6, I've come to realize that the battle within is not so much about an internal struggle between my reason and my emotions, or what goes on between my head and heart. It is rather about where I place my trust, or more specifically, the One in whom I place my trust, because trust involves both reason and emotion, and often our very bodies. It is less about striving to practice a certain ideal, and more about engaging in a relationship rooted in confidence, assurance, hope, and provision for our deepest needs.

Possibly like you, I've made plenty of attempts to rectify and fix myself up, perhaps to meet a self-imposed ideal, or at times to secure the attraction or praise of others. Often those attempts have been for God, so that he would, at a minimum, not be ashamed of me, or at best, be proud to claim me as his creation. After all, as 2 Peter 3:14 reminds us, we are called to present ourselves to God, *at peace, without spot or blemish*. However, I am so often not at peace and the spots and blemishes are numerous. Worse yet, I walk around with the feeling that everyone can see those blemishes quite clearly!

This is where the rubber hits the road of our spiritual journey. It comes down to how you, as Jesus says here in his Sermon on the Mount, (Matthew 6) "practice your piety." Do you do it for others to see, or do you do it for God? *Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven* (v.1).

He goes on in this passage to talk about the spiritual practices of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. *So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in [worship] and in the streets, so they may be praised by others* (v.3). In the Jewish tradition of Jesus' time, almsgiving was considered a religious duty, not something you did voluntarily for credit or recognition. It was part of being God's people.

Not unlike when I asked my mother for money for making my bed or doing the dishes growing up. Her response was, "Sorry, Charlie, that's just part of living under this roof!" For a while, I wondered why she called me Charlie! But you get the point; giving to the poor is just part of living under the church's roof. It's what this family does, and it's expected. The reward isn't someone else's attention. The reward is knowing you are a child of God caring for another child of God. To our surprise, when we take ourselves out of central consideration, we discover a greater reward than what we hoped for.

To turn a quote from a celebrity recently in the news on its head, "Duhhh...winning...." according to the Gospel, means emptying yourself of your need for attention, which then leads you on the path of understanding your true self. *And when you pray, says Jesus in verse 5, do not be like the hypocrites* (by which he means like stage actors playing a part); *for they love to stand in [worship] and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others*.

What he is getting at there is that, by definition, prayer is not directed toward others (such as preaching is); it is directed toward God.² Karl Barth writes, "...prayer is not proclamation. Prayer takes place fundamentally in 'thy closet, and when thou has shut the door.' i.e. in secret....Prayer is not prayer if it is addressed to anyone else but God." So do not fool yourself in thinking that praying in front of others is good in itself. Prayer is good, but it is about you and God. You can pray anywhere; just do not do it so others will be impressed by how godly you are.

As an aside, I'll say it's not unusual for me to pray with others in public places, at a table in a restaurant to give thanks, or when sitting with others in conversation. I engage in such prayer not because we're in public to make a point of it, but because I feel I don't need to hide my relationship with God. I don't have to be embarrassed by it, any more than I feel I should be embarrassed to speak with a friend in public. In the end, prayer is your communion with God, not intended as witness or preaching or as a sign of piety. It is for you and God to know and bless one another.

The same goes for fasting. In the Protestant tradition fasting is not such a common practice. Although there are, probably, many Presbyterians that practice fasting, they don't, as this passage advises, make it known to others by contortions of their countenance. The point of a fast is to enter into an inward spiritual discipline, with the intent of being reminded, as Jesus said when he quoted from Deuteronomy, "*we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God* (Deut. 8:3). To fast is to be reminded that our need for God is our greatest need.

Anthony Bloom, in his book, *Living Prayer*, writes of humility, "It is the attitude of one who is like the soil. Humility comes from the Latin *humus*, fertile ground...It is so low that nothing can soil it, abase it, humiliate it; it has accepted the last place and cannot go any lower. In that position nothing can shatter the soul's serenity, its peace and joy."³

The Lenten practice of the imposition of ashes is not a sign for others, so much as it is for you ... to remember that *you are dust, and to dust you shall return* (Gen.3:19). To remember that it is God's breath in you that makes you human. The ashes are a reminder for you to turn yourself again into fertile soil, so he might breathe his way in into your heart and mind and way of living, that you might live in his righteousness, not your own. If there is any piety to be practiced in the season of Lent, and in our Christian walk, it is to remember our need for God, and in such remembrance, ready ourselves so the seed of Christ's way will grow and be nurtured within and without.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 David Brooks, "The New Humanism," *The New York Times*, March 7, 2011.

2 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, bk. 4, *The Doctrine of Creation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 88.

3 Anthony Bloom, *Living Prayer* (October: 1974), quoted in Rueben P. Job, Norman Shawchuck, *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1983), 321.