

March 5, 2025

Rev. Lisa Schrott

Psalm 51:6-12 & Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

The Practice of Faith

Our scripture this Ash Wednesday evening comes from the middle section of the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew. The sermon begins in Matthew chapter 5: When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he began to speak and taught them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus continues with what we know as the Beatitudes, which are followed by reminder that we are salt of the earth and the light of the world. Jesus then begins a long discourse about how we are to live not just within the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law – the law that calls us to love our neighbors and pray for those who are persecuting you. In this section of the sermon, Jesus gives us instructions on how we are to practice our faith. Hear now these words from Matthew chapter 6:

[Jesus says], “Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And whenever you fast, do not look somber, like the hypocrites, for they mark their faces to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

I am one of those odd ducks who actually reads instruction manuals – and saves them in organized folders in a file cabinet – despite the fact that I can Google the information when I need it and the fact that the manuals often include less than helpful information. I remember when Brian and I were living in Minnesota many moons ago. I was trying to get the snow blower to start one morning and the helpful tips from manual told me not to use it on the roof and not to use my hands to dislodge compacted snow. Considering I couldn't get it to start, I wasn't too worried about that. My iron came with the helpful advice to not iron clothes while they were on the body. My favorite product warning, though, is one a friend of mine posted on Facebook a few Halloweens ago: on a child's Superman costume was posted this warning: *Wearing of this garment does not enable you to fly.*

Yes... we can poke fun at the necessity to post instructions and rules on just about everything we come across, and yet we also recognize the value of a shared set of laws and instructions to structure our society. In our scripture tonight Jesus' focuses on instructions for how we are to live as a people of faith, as people worshipping the one true God, particularly as we make offerings and pray before God.

Jesus gets that we won't always get it right. So he cuts right to the heart of the matter, so to speak, and probes the things that people of his time and people today are want to do. [*Jesus says*], "Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven." You want a gold star for fasting or alms giving so you parade around looking like a sad sack or filling your social media feed with humble brags. not so fast. Jesus comes back with "**But when you give alms... when you pray...when you fast.....**

For Jesus it is what is in your heart that matters – not only the action you take. Jesus calls us to a deeper place – the kingdom of heaven. Now scholars have long argued why the gospel writer Matthew uses the phrase Kingdom of Heaven, while the gospel writers Mark and Luke use Kingdom of God; but the consistent and frequent use of this language argues that it was an aspirational goal for the primarily Jewish audience who Matthew was addressing. And to be part of this kingdom of heaven meant that outward and ceremonial obedience to the rule of law and the practices of faith were not the priority. Because the rules and practices underlying the kingdom of heaven spring from the heart and are grounded in love. And this is not easy work. It would be much easier for us to just declare it than it is to actually do it. Look at me – I am a good Christian. I read my Bible, I fast, I pray, and give money to charities. See... look at me. God is blessing me. I am special. Give me attention. It is all about "me." And Jesus says, you are missing the point. It is about God.

Jesus says practice your faith in such a way that God knows you are faithful. Some have interpreted this scripture to indicate that we should not share our faith practices or give testimony. I don't think that is what Jesus is getting at here. When we tell the story of our

faith, we are pointing to the triune God, what God the Father, God the son in Jesus Christ, and God the Holy Spirit is doing in our life. And yet we are living in a world that elevates and celebrates the outward doings and achievements we present to the world, rather than celebrating our inward facing life, which includes our failures, our sins, our separations from others, and yes, our mortality.

Lent is a time when we embrace this struggle. We recognize that everything is not always hunk dory and easy; rainbows and unicorns. We recognize that we live in a world of injustice and violence, of loneliness and disease, of vast disparities in power and wealth. We get stuck in the mud and muck of life, of gray days and dark nights, of a thousand paper cuts wounding our soul and great big chasms threatening to swallow us up.

So how do we practice our faith in honest and authentic ways amidst these struggles? We begin by acknowledging that we are living in wilderness times. We are parched by heated rhetoric that fills the air. We are blown about, untethered and seeking moorings, by the hostile winds of those seeking to lord their power over the vulnerable. We trudge every day through the relentless shifting sands, never seeming to make progress towards our destination or even an oasis of calm.

So how do we practice our faith in honest and authentic ways amidst these struggles? We tell the story of our faith in wilderness times. We share our story with others, being vulnerable and authentic. We listen to the stories of others, really listen and connect with who they are and how God has moved in their lives. We are offering opportunities to share stories through verbal, written, and drawing prompts, beginning next Thursday, March 13 (a week from tomorrow). We will share a simple meal, pray together, and break into small groups. I hope you can join us across the six weeks, as often as your schedule permits.

As we hear and share how God is leading us through the wilderness, we will be sharing together in the walk to the cross... the walk of humility Jesus call us all to face with him. A practice of our faith. A walk that includes Jesus' death on the cross. That walk begins today as we recognize our human mortality. From dust we arise and from dust we will return. We are beloved children of God. May it be so. Amen.