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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church – Florissant, MO
Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2021
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday can be confusing. We hear in the first reading the call to sound the trumpets. In the Gospel, we hear Jesus say, now don't go sounding the trumpets when you do something good. And then, no sooner do we hear Jesus telling his disciples that they should not make a public display of their piety, than we mark our foreheads with ashes for all to see.

So, what is going on here? Do the words of Jesus conflict with our beloved ritual action on this day? Or is there something deeper going on? I think there is. I don't think Jesus is condemning our specific practices. I think he is asking us to go deeper with them and consider our motivation.

We humans need affirmation. We need to be noticed. Have you ever felt invisible? I know I have – in a conversation where I have nothing to contribute or at a party where I don't know anyone. Have you had your name left off of a congratulatory list it should have rightly been on? What about when someone takes credit for your idea or your work and they get the accolades for it instead of you? My younger friends tell me of a particular type of invisibility today in dating called ghosting. That's where one person in the relationship just disappears suddenly without any explanation.

It's a terrible feeling, isn't it? To feel invisible. It makes us feel like we are not good enough. We aren't lovable. Maybe worst of all, it makes us feel like we don't belong. I think Jesus understands that about us. He knows we are wired for connection. He knows that we need to feel like we belong and that we are seen. But he also knows that we often go about it in the

wrong way. When our need to be seen and affirmed by the right people becomes our motivating force, then Jesus tells us, we are stopping short. We are missing the opportunity to go deeper and to allow ourselves to be seen and affirmed by God, our Creator.

I know it's weird to be observing Ash Wednesday on Zoom. But I also wonder if there is a gift in this. We will impose ashes on our foreheads in a few minutes in the privacy of our own homes. We won't go to work or shopping or next door with the display of ashes on our foreheads for all to see. Does that change the meaning for us? Does that make it seem a little bit pointless?

Or is it a chance to step back and think about what we are doing here. It's not the ashes themselves that matter, it's the reminder that from dust we came and to dust we shall return. It's the reminder of our mortality and our utter dependence on God. It is the reminder that we sin, we focus on the wrong things. We hurt one another and we hurt ourselves. We treasure what other people think about us and we let that steer us to places that are not authentic to who we are as God's children.

That's why Jesus tells us not to parade our piety around. Because seeking the approval and the accolades of those all around us allows other people to determine our worth and our validity. It also leaves us in the position of being the ones to determine the worth of another, of judging those who don't fit in or look like us or think like us or pray like us.

So, no, Jesus isn't condemning the spiritual practices of his day or our day. He is not critiquing our need to be seen. He is inviting us to go deeper, to be seen by our Creator whose gaze is life-giving and steadfast. It isn't a gaze that changes with the times or the fashion or trends of the day. God is not impressed by outward signs of our piety or perfect liturgy or just the right words or actions. God sees us, notices us in the secret depths of our hearts.

Lent is a time when we go to those secret places in our hearts and allow God's gaze to change us, to take our hearts of stone and give us hearts for love and compassion and reconciliation. Rooted in that gaze we can enter into this time of prayer and fasting and service whole-heartedly. We can look with God deep into our hearts and be honest about where we are, who we are, what needs to change, what needs to grow. Our reward is that we find our true selves, our true identity in the gaze of God who already sees us and knows us and loves us.