

Sermon: Ash Wednesday Reflection

Year A, Ash Wednesday

[Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 51:1-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6,16-21](#)

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Ash Wednesday is the beginning of Lent, the beginning of our preparations for Good Friday, the day that Jesus was crucified. We shouted “Hosanna” when he entered Jerusalem, and a week later, we shouted “Crucify.” As his disciples, we denied that we knew him, we left him to die alone, in shame and agony. We let women and outsiders give his body the honorable burial that any member of our tribe deserves. And when we were told that his body was missing, we assumed the worst and ran away.

It's sort of odd that we get six weeks to prepare for hypocrisy, denial, desertion, betrayal, cynicism and fear. We seem to do those pretty instinctively. So perhaps the preparation is to admit not only that we recognize all these faults, but that we recognize them in ourselves. When you look at what Jesus is cautioning his followers against in tonight's reading, it's clear he wants us to give alms and pray and fast. He just wants us to recognize how we're doing it. And why we're doing it.

So much of our lives is spent thinking about what other people think of us, how we'll be perceived, whether we measure up. Maintaining an image for outsiders drives our choices for clothes, and cars, what cell phone we buy, what college we send our kids to, how we care for our parents in their old age. If we're honest, even those of you who are firm in your commitment to doing the unconventional, are sending a signal to the rest of us that you will not be bound by petty conventions. Which is just a convention of a different kind.

Jesus is offering us the opportunity to step out of that tiny and shrinking circle of living for others' expectations.¹ Jesus is calling us to give alms not because of what it says about us, but what happens to the other when we do. Jesus is calling us to pray without calling attention to ourselves, but by putting our attention on the Holy Other, who is always listening. Jesus is calling us to fast, to walk away from the tyranny of fulfilling our unending desires, to acknowledge that our desires can only be met by the Holy Other. Jesus is calling us to escape the insecurity that comes from assessing our own worth in terms of acquired treasures, all of which can disappear in an instant given the vicissitudes of this life.² Jesus is calling us to do the impossible.

We cannot possibly follow Christ. The hypocrisy, denial, desertion, betrayal, cynicism and fear rise up in us too readily. We cannot possibly follow Christ because our wiring as a social animal shrieks at us to care about what others think of us, lest we are left to die alone and in pain, abandoned by everyone else in our tribe. We cannot possibly follow Christ, except by grace.³

¹ Douglas John Hall, “Ash Wednesday, Theological Perspective, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 24.

² Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 72.

³ Liz Goodman, "Preaching the Lenten Texts," *Journal For Preachers* 37, no. 2 (2014), 3.

That is why we need six weeks, or two millennia and counting, to prepare. We who would go where Christ leads know that the journey is impossible when we take it on with only ourselves to rely on. When we accept God's grace freely given, the journey remains impossible, but the journey, in all its impossibility, becomes the way to recognize the truth that gives life its form, shape and direction.⁴ It takes a whole lifetime of preparation to accept God's grace, grace we need if we are to follow Christ where he leads, to the Cross of Good Friday.

During Lent, Christ's call to us lays out the challenge we have accepted as Christians. We will look at our intentions and find them self-serving. We will look at where our hearts are and discover they are bound to rusting and rotting treasure. We will look at the journey we have been called to and know it to be impossible. At the start of Lent we will wear an ashen cross on our forehead which condemns us as the sinners we are. At the end of Lent, we will fail, as we always do, to meet the challenge of Good Friday.

But because of those six weeks of preparation, because of those whole lifetimes of preparation, we will hold on for a few dozen hours more. Easter will come, the sure and eternal sign of God's unending and unearned grace. The cross which condemned us on Ash Wednesday will raise us to eternal life on Easter. Ash Wednesday is the beginning of Lent, the beginning of our preparations for Good Friday. Nothing can prepare us for Easter. Not then. Not now. Not ever.

⁴ Goodman, 3.