

“Showiness”
St. Paul’s UCC Church
Ash Wednesday
March 2, 2022

Friends in Christ....

It is interesting that those who prepared the Revised Common Lectionary chose our Gospel text from Mathew for Ash Wednesday when we wear an ashen cross on our foreheads in public not to be showy. As typical with Jesus there is more to the story.

First, we will touch on our Old Testament lesson from the prophet Joel. Joel is one of the shortest books in the Bible, only three chapters. Taken from the second chapter, Joel speaks of the blessing that is possible for Israel, if only they would repent. Considering the many blessings that come with repentance, one might think that the people would eagerly run to God’s invitation to penitence. Despite its potential for blessing, it is unfortunate that the people, including ancient Israel, would resist repentance. Here now Joel’s call for repentance:

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 Announcement of alarm and peril

2 Blow the horn in Zion;
 give a shout on my holy mountain!
Let all the people of the land tremble,
 for the day of the LORD is coming.
It is near—
² a day of darkness and no light,
 a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness spread out upon the mountains,
 a great and powerful army comes,
 unlike any that has ever come before them,
 or will come after them in centuries ahead.

Change your hearts

¹² Yet even now, says the LORD,
 return to me with all your hearts,
 with fasting, with weeping, and with sorrow;
¹³ tear your hearts
 and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD your God,
 for he is merciful and compassionate,
 very patient, full of faithful love,
 and ready to forgive.

¹⁴ Who knows whether he will have a change of heart
and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain offering and a drink offering
for the LORD your God?

¹⁵ Blow the horn in Zion;
demand a fast;
request a special assembly.

¹⁶ Gather the people;
prepare a holy meeting;
assemble the elders;
gather the children,
even nursing infants.

Let the groom leave his room
and the bride her chamber.

¹⁷ Between the porch and the altar
let the priests, the LORD's ministers, weep.
Let them say, "Have mercy, LORD, on your people,
and do not make your inheritance a disgrace,
an example of failure among the nations.
Why should they say among the peoples,
'Where is their God?'"

The lack of response of the people leads one to ask, "Why? Why are people so reluctant to repent even when they know that blessings are waiting?" Repentance necessitates recognition and admission of guilt, of having done wrong, of being sorry for the hurt one caused another. Individually or collectively, propped up by a false sense of self, people would rather live in denial than have a contrite spirit, admit they were mistaken, and say "I'm sorry. I was wrong. Please forgive me."

Joel is among the biblical prophets who repeatedly, to no avail, pled with Israel to turn to God and leave its faults and failures, its sins, behind. Scholars debate the time when Joel lived. If he lived before or during the exile, he warns Israel that war with Assyria or Babylon, a war that the reader knows Israel will lose, is on the horizon. If he lived during the time of the Second Temple, his imagery is a reminder of Israel's covenant with God. Either way, Joel writes to warn Israel that communal sin has consequences.

Joel calls for the entire community to gather, nursing infants, children, and aged alike, to fast, to weep, and to plead for God’s mercy. This appeal to God is accompanied by a reminder to God that Israel is God’s heritage. The reminder is an impetuous plea since Israel has not followed God’s commandments and can only hope that God will respond with an undeserved kindness—a kindness based on God’s grace and character—the same character presented to Moses so many years before (Exodus 34:6).

The call in Joel 2 can be read as a call to draw closer to God. That would make it appropriate for Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. Lent is the season in which we as the Church are to draw closer to God using the very same spiritual disciplines disclosed in Joel: prayer and fasting. Joel 2:16 calls for the entire community to respond to the call for rededication.

Joel offers a familiar tender portrait of the God who draws us in: “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing” (2:13). This core description of God is foundational in Judaism and is repeated throughout the scriptures expressing God’s tender love.

It is a reminder to be humble, both before God and before one another as we bask in God’s love. In Mathew, Jesus has come down from giving the Sermon on the Mount and addresses the crowd with the following remarks about being showy:

Gospel: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 (CEB)

Showy religion

6 “Be careful that you do not practice your religion in front of people to draw their attention. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

²“Whenever you give to the poor, do not blow your trumpet as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets so that they may get praise from people. I assure you, that is the only reward they will get. ³But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing ⁴so that you may give to the poor in secret. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.

Showy prayer

⁵“When you pray, do not be like hypocrites. They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners so that people will see them. I assure you, that is the only reward they will get. ⁶But when you pray, go to

your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.

Matthew 6:16-21 Showy fasting

¹⁶“And when you fast, do not put on a sad face like the hypocrites. They distort their faces so people will know they are fasting. I assure you that they have their reward. ¹⁷When you fast, brush your hair and wash your face. ¹⁸Then you will not look like you are fasting to people, but only to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Earthly and heavenly treasures

¹⁹“Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. ²⁰Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust do not eat them and where thieves do not break in and steal them. ²¹Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

May God bless our hearing of his Holy Word. Amen.

Melinda Quivik wrote: “In that Roman-occupied land, Jesus saw great disparities: the 2 percent with wealth and power had peace and plenty under the Pax Romana (Peace of Rome) while the 98 percent were oppressed politically, economically, theologically, and militarily. About 10 percent of the poor were always on the edge—beggars, sick, people with handicaps, and criminals. Those who had access to land grew food for the wealthy. The Peace of Rome was only for a very few. Because those who lived at subsistence levels were illiterate, they left little record of their lives. But scholars using sources outside of the Bible are able to determine what was going on.”

In this passage, Jesus talks about three important gestures of our piety: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. In Jesus’ context, the falsity of these gestures was such that Jesus had to say harsh things against those who performed the external gestures of a faith that had nothing that resembled any inward belief or conviction. It seemed like there was an Olympics of Piety going on where one person fought another to show how pious one could be. Jesus called these people hypocrites, whitewashed sepulchers, and demanded a different way of living out their faith.

Because this is the day of ashes, the beginning of Lent, the time to set one’s vision on the enormity of Jesus’ incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension,

this is also a day to talk about death—what we are made of and what we will become. It is a day of utter honesty. Remembering Jesus' context—being sought out by people in pain and hunger, sickness and despair—we are urged to ask ourselves, as well, what maladies afflict us and to see that the struggles in our lives are, like those of our neighbors, the birds and animals, plants, water, and air, in need of redemption by the dust-shaper.

Let us quietly practice in our faith journey, supporting one another. Wear our sign of the cross with humility.

Thanks be to God. Amen.