

March 2, 2022

Texts: Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

Title: "When We're Estranged from God"

Ash Wednesday

We're all aware of the traditions of giving up something for Lent. Usually it means something like chocolate, or beer, or some other alleged vice. And let's face it, people make jokes about it. One guy said he gave up taxes for Lent. Another said he'd given up his New Year's resolutions for Lent. Stephen Colbert--who, I understand, is a Sunday school teacher at his Catholic church--joked that he was giving up being Catholic for Lent.

So it can be funny but the idea, originally, was to share experientially in the sufferings of Christ. He gave his life for us so the idea is that we should give up something to show our devotion to him. However, it hasn't always worked too well.

Dean Snyder, pastor at Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington said he was doing some research on religion and eating. He came across an article stating that in medieval times, monks gave up butter and lard and fat for Lent. They had an Ash Wednesday ceremony called "Burying the Fat" in which they would put butter in a casket, hold a funeral service, and bury the casket. They gave up butter, lard and fat, because this apparently made them constipated, and this-- they felt--was their way of sharing in the sufferings of Christ. I guess there are all kinds of ways to share in Christ's suffering.

A serious response to this idea of making a sacrifice during Lent has been for many Christians to fast during Lent. Many have felt over the centuries, that fasting has brought them closer to God.

Fasting was popular during the great revival of in the 1800's called the Great Awakening. John Wesley, father of the Methodist movement and his brother Charles and other fellow believers regularly fasted and prayed. John Wesley so believed in this practice that he urged the people to fast and pray every Wednesday and Friday. And he refused to ordain a minister who wouldn't agree to do it. There are probably a lot of pastors today that are thankful this isn't required any more but believe me, many people have benefited spiritually from this practice.

But even a good thing like fasting can be abused, at least according to our reading in Matthew. Jesus seems to be endorsing it as a spiritual discipline but he says don't do it just to show how religious you are.

St. John Chrysostom, when it came to fasting asked, "Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your works. If you see a poor man, take pity on him. If you see a friend being honored, don't envy him. Don't let only your mouth fast, but also the eye and the ear and the feet and the hands and all the members of our bodies. Let the hands fast, by being free of greediness. Let the feet fast, by ceasing to run after sin. Let the eyes fast, by disciplining them not to glare at that which is sinful...Let the ear fast...by not listening to evil talk and gossip...Let the mouth fast from foul words and unjust

criticism. For what good is it if we abstain from birds and fishes but bite and devour our brothers?" That's hitting the nail on the head for sure.

The central purpose of lent is to bring us back to God, that we who've wandered away from Him might come home. We can pray and give and fast or give up something for Lent, but even more important is for us to recognize that we need to come back to God or if we've never come to God, take a step in that direction. **For all of us, I believe, to some degree are estranged from God.** We have our issues that keep us estranged. We have emotions that will not heal, resentments that still fester, prejudices that come to the surface when we're stressed. We're like snowflakes. They're beautiful and white and look so pure, but every snowflake has a tiny piece of dust at its core. And so do we. That's why Ash Wednesday and Lent are so important for us--they help us deal with the things that keep us from reflecting Christ's image.

Of course, if we're reconciled with God we may have an easier time of being reconciled with others. They tend to go hand in hand. I read a story about a priest who had many parishioners that had been angry at each other for years. One Sunday, he locked the doors to the church. And he told the people that he wouldn't let them out until they confessed their sins and made peace. First it was silent but then one of them got up and confessed his misdeeds and asked forgiveness. Others followed and it was the most powerful moment that church had ever had.

In a few minutes I will be applying ashes to your forehead and what I want to say is **don't wear those ashes in vain.** This world hungers for an authentic sign of Christian

devotion. If we wear those ashes home tonight, let's not snap at our family. Or if we stop at McDonald's on the way home, let's not be impatient with the server. Let's show genuine Christian love and goodwill in action and be reconciled to God and with others for those ashes aren't a sign of our great faith but of our humility. We're sinners who need God's grace. May you have a blessed Lent. Amen.