

"Not Just Talking to Ourselves"

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Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Lent is a season of prayer, soul-searching and repentance. Lent is also a time to cleanse our hearts and prepare to celebrate Holy Week. Lent is 40 days long, not counting Sundays. There are 40 days from Ash Wednesday to Easter, not counting Sundays.

40 as you probably know is an important number in the Bible.

- A. In the days of Noah it rained for 40 days & 40 nights.
- B. In the days of Jonah God gave Niniveh 40 days to change their ways.
- C. When the Israelites were wandering through the wilderness for 40 years, Moses sent out spies to explore the Promised Land. Their expedition lasted, you guessed it, 40 days.
- D. Moses spent 40 days on Mt. Sinai to prepare to receive the Ten Commandments.
- E. Following his Baptism Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, preparing for his ministry.
- F. And following his Resurrection guess how many days Jesus spent with his disciples before he ascended to heaven? Yup. 40.

So during Lent we take 40 days to strengthen our spiritual lives. As religious people we need to do this because sometimes we can fool ourselves. I once heard someone say that having religion is a little like a flu shot - you get a little bit of it and it prevents you from getting the real thing. If I understand flu shots correctly, what's injected gives you a little bit of the flu so your body makes the antibodies needed to prevent you from getting a terrible case of the real flu. Well, getting a little bit of religion or even a lot of religion can sometimes prevent us from getting the real thing. Let's take a look at Matthew 6 and you'll see what I mean.

Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

"Beware of practicing your piety 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 dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as 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."

A business man was setting up his new office for the company he had just started. It was Day #1. He was enjoying organizing the new desk he had purchased. And he sat there arranging things - the little paper clip holder, a letter tray, his lap top and so forth - when suddenly he heard someone walking down the hallway. His first customer was coming! So he

quickly picked up the handset from the big phone that was sitting on his desk, and he began to speak: "Yes, we handle these sorts of orders all the time. This is no problem for our company. We'll get that out to you by the end of the day." With that he put down the handset and looked up at the person who now stood in the doorway. "Can I help you?" he said. The man looked confused and said, "Yeah, I'm here to hook up your phone."

The season of Lent is an important time for Christians. It's important for our souls - so that we don't end up like the man in the story - not connected, just talking to ourselves, hoping we look good. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus had a big concern about this. In fact he noticed something rather unusual about some highly religious people. He noticed that a number of them in his faith tradition were not very connected to God. They seemed to have hearts for religious activity but not hearts for God. Now these are not judgments that you and I should be making. When it comes to evaluating other people hearts and motives, we leave that to God. But God-Incarnate knew peoples' hearts. And Jesus could see that when it came to the basic religious practices of his day, folks were disconnected from the Spirit while they were performing their spiritual duties. And so that's what it became - a performance.

The commentaries tell us that in First Century Judaism, there were three basic religious practices - Almsgiving, Prayer and Fasting. And that was the priority list as well.

A. Giving to the poor was first - "Almsgiving."

They believed this was "the most sacred of all religious duties" (Barclay, p. 187). In fact, the Jews used the same word for righteousness as they did for almsgiving. Righteousness and Almsgiving were the same word, "*tzedakah*." That's how highly they held helping the poor. It was essential to righteousness, to being Godlike. But in the First Century, our Gospel Lesson tells us that some people were doing the right things for all the wrong reasons. Remember the I Corinthians 13 passage - "*If I give away all my possessions to the poor, but don't do it in love, I gain nothing.*" But folks were being very showy in their giving, wanting others to see how generous they were. Jesus said, "They might as well blow the

trumpet! Look at me I'm giving to the poor." That doesn't really honor God or the poor, does it? Jesus says, "When you give, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." - which should make us all feel better about our church. Occasionally around here the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing! Apparently that's ok!

B. The next great spiritual practice, second to almsgiving, was prayer.

Prayer, of course, is not just a duty or simply a spiritual practice, it's a privilege, isn't it? Our Creator invites us into fellowship, companionship, partnership.

Imagine if I call up the White House today and I ask to speak with the President of the United States. And the switchboard operator says, "Whom shall I say is calling?" "It's Rich Knight of North Andover, MA . . . ah . . . ah . . this is Rev. Dr. Richard B. Knight of North Andover, MA." They're not taking my call today. God, the President of the Universe, on the other hand seeks out fellowship with us "Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and have fellowship." - no questions asked. *"What a fellowship! What a joy divine! Leaning on the everlasting arms."* - What a privilege, too.

But some of the religious folks in Jesus' day had forgotten that prayer was a privilege. They had set schedules for prayer, which isn't a bad thing at all. They were to pray at 9 am, noontime and 3 pm. But what some would do was they'd make sure they were in very public places, like the marketplace, when the right times came. And then they would say their prayers quite boldly, dramatically, in performance mode - so they would look good before others. But is the goal of prayer to look good before others?

Many years ago a preacher was writing about a rather ornate and elaborate prayer said in a church in Boston. The prayer was described as *"the most eloquent prayer ever offered to a Boston audience."* There's only one problem with that, isn't there? Prayer is not to be offered for any earthly audience, only to an audience of One.

So folks in Jesus' day were making a mess of almsgiving and a mess of prayer, & one more thing -

C. The Third Spiritual Practice of ancient times was fasting - going without food for a time to remind oneself of one's need for God. The hunger pangs are to be a reminder to pray, a reminder of how our souls are dependent upon God, just as our bodies dependent on food. But what Jesus again sees is that folks had the wrong focus. He noticed that some would apply what was essentially make-up to their faces, so that they would look quite pale, so as to give the appearance that they had been fasting for quite a long time and therefore . . . must be very spiritual! So again, it's putting on a show!

This had to be hugely upsetting for Jesus, because it meant that their religion had become all about them, and not all about God. There's that old confession of sin, "We have worshipped ourselves and the things we have made." "We have worshipped ourselves." Their core religious practices weren't drawing them closer to God. They weren't honoring God with their religious duties, they were seeking to honor themselves.

That's a sad and scary thing to see, especially for us as we find ourselves at the start of Lent. We're the highly religious people of our day, and we get even more religious this time of year. Heck, we might even do all three of the ancient practices - give alms to the poor, pray and fast.

A few weeks ago I mentioned the term, "*Civic Faith*," coined by UCC pastor Anthony Robinson. The goal of a civic faith is to make us good citizens, people of high moral virtues, and people who strive to do the right thing. "There's nothing wrong with that," says Robinson, "*it's just that there's nothing specifically Christian about it.*" (p. 61) A Biblical Faith is very different from a Civic Faith. A Biblical Faith is about encountering God, experiencing God and being transformed by the presence and power of God. It seems to me that the Pharisees were just concerned with a Civic Faith, looking like they were people who did the right thing. And they were fooling themselves and had lost God in the process. Their religious practices revolved around themselves, and therefore their

religion was empty because the focus was on themselves and not on God.

This is why we need Lent. Because we need the practices of confession, reflection and repentance. We need religious practices that start with the heart. It's the Control Room of our lives, that place where decisions are made, values are held or not, where love reigns or doesn't. God can see in there quite clearly. It takes us a bit more work. That work is Lent. Lent is the season that we need, So that we don't end up just talking to ourselves.

Think about it.

Let's pray about it.

Give us eyes to see as you see, O God, when it comes to our own hearts. Make this Lent a true season of honest confession and sincere repentance, so that we might be remade more into the image of your Son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.