

No Trespassing
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
Ash Wednesday, February 21, 2007

I.

Today's reading from Matthew is steeped in history. It has been the reading appointed for every Ash Wednesday since the Episcopal Church was founded in 1789. It has been the reading appointed for every Ash Wednesday in the Anglican Church since the first Book of Common Prayer in 1549. And it was read at this time during Lent in the early church from its beginnings.

Matthew's message is and has been central to one of the most ancient, and sacred, and holy observances of the church.

Today, and in the weeks to come until Easter, we remember the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, and we accept that we too are called to suffer and die with him, obviously not in the literal sense, but instead in a discipline of searching ourselves for the things that separate us from God.

During this time we are summoned to name those things in our lives that are not in accordance with God's will for us. We are called to recognize where the ways of the world have made inroads into our spirituality. During this time we ask ourselves, "where is Satan trespassing in my life."

And unless you are truly a saint, then that great deceiver, that father of all lies, is somewhere lurking about. I know that I am not a saint. I regularly contend with the sneaky ways the enemy uses to draw me away from a holy life. We all have our weaknesses, and it is up to us during this Lenten period to identify them, to fence them off, and to put up signs to Satan that say "No Trespassing."

II.

The first half of the first sentence of today's reading guides us in doing that. Let me read it again. "Jesus said, "beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them." That summarizes it all. In the rest of the reading Jesus developed examples to illustrate that basic point.

He referred to the hypocrites, the scribes and Pharisees, who made big productions of their prayers, their almsgiving, and their fasting. And while Jesus did not explain why these practices had come into existence, he certainly explained how they were not pleasing to God.

He made it clear that pious practices, which might be good things in and of themselves, cease to have any meaning to God when they are done for the wrong reasons.

III.

At the end of this homily I will invite you to the observance of a holy Lent; a Lent of self-examination and repentance, of prayer, fasting, and self-denial, and of reading and meditating on God's holy Word.

These are the ways in which we encounter God's will for our lives, and they are the ways in which the Holy Spirit makes that will known to us. They are the tools we will need to put up that "No Trespassing" sign I mentioned earlier.

And, in addition, many of us will begin, or might already have begun, a Lenten discipline we have selected to assist us in drawing closer to God.

I will repeat that—"a Lenten discipline to assist us in drawing closer to God." The key words are "drawing closer to God." If we take today's Gospel reading seriously, that will be the reason behind what we have decided to give up, or start doing.

If, however, our Lenten discipline is not intended to draw us closer to God, but is based on worldly reasons, then we might ask ourselves if there is something yet left undone.

What does this mean? Well, I have seen people, for example, give up drinking for Lent. And, I know that some of them did not do it because they wanted to draw closer to God, but because they wanted to be seen doing it by others, like the scribes and Pharisees in today's reading.

I have heard people say that they gave up chocolate for Lent so they could lose weight and make sure they could fit into their bathing suits. Now, I am not against losing weight to fit into bathing suits. I should do that myself, and I would pray that the Lord would help me do it. But I'm not going to try to fool the Lord by claiming it's a Lenten discipline that I am doing for him.

On the other hand, to continue using those examples, if you think that alcohol or chocolate interferes with the life that God wants you to live, then by all means address those issues during Lent. If you think that either of them affects your relationship with your Lord or your family, or is harmful to the body God gave you, then they certainly would be a prime candidates for Lenten disciplines.

And alcohol and chocolate are only two examples. There are many others, and all of our situations are different. We each are called to examine what we might do in our own lives to enable us to set aside impediments to having the relationship with God that he wants us to have, and to living the life that he wants us to live.

Today's Gospel emphasizes not only what we do, but why we do it. And sometimes looks can be deceiving. Like the scribes and Pharisees, we can look and act and sound like something we are not. Matthew's Gospel tells us that what is in our hearts is what counts.

The basic point here is that if we search ourselves in prayer, if we are honest with ourselves and our Lord, and if we ask for guidance from the Holy Spirit, we will know how to approach this Lenten season as our Lord intends.

IV.

Lent is a time of preparation and transformation. By remembering our Lord's suffering and death, we are enabled to see more clearly the obstacles to a holy life that the world places in our path. And as we see those obstacles more clearly we can avoid them and live more completely the life promised in our baptismal covenant.

Then, to the forces and influences of darkness that search for ways to come into our lives, we truly can say "No Trespassing." *Amen.*