

Right Things for the Right Reasons

Matthew 6:1-6, 16,-21

Ash Wednesday, February 6, 2008

I.

As we embark on our Lenten journeys, we are called to remember the suffering and death of Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and to prepare ourselves for Good Friday and Easter. And we accept that we too are called to 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.

This means we are challenged to examine ourselves in several ways. 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 world's ways have made inroads into God's ways.

One place to start is to ask whether the things we do in the world during the week are consistent with the things we say in church on Sunday. Do we live what we pray? Another is to consider whether we select our Lenten disciplines to serve ourselves or to serve our Lord.

II.

These questions are inherent in today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew. We were told of the hypocrites who sounded the trumpet when they gave alms, who tried to be obvious when they prayed, and who altered their appearances when they fasted.

These people did all the right things for all the wrong reasons. They made big productions of their piety in the belief that others would see them and would be impressed.

But that really isn't the purpose of Lent, is it? We don't commit to a Lenten discipline just to impress others, do we? We hope that during this time we can draw closer to God in truth, sincerity, and an honest assessment of how we are living our lives. And we cannot achieve that if our self-interest interferes with our self-examination.

III.

An old story might be an example of this. A priest was walking down a street at night when a fellow jumped out from a dark alley, pulled a gun and told the priest to hand over his wallet. As he started to do so, his coat fell aside and the robber saw that his victim was a priest.

Well, the robber changed his tune, and said he was sorry because he didn't rob priests. The priest obviously was relieved, and as a gesture of Christian charity reached into his coat pocket, pulled out one of his cigars, and offered it to the other fellow. Well, wouldn't you know that the robber said he couldn't accept it because he had given up cigars for Lent.

What's wrong with that picture? Obviously, this fellow had given up the wrong thing. The problem in his life did not appear to be smoking cigars, but rather robbing people.

Other examples can make the same point. I have known people who gave up drinking or stopped eating chocolate for Lent. And, I know that some of them did not do it because they wanted to be closer to God, but because they wanted to be seen doing it by others, or because they wanted to lose weight so they could fit into their bathing suits.

Now, I'm 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. In my case, however, I'm not going to try to fool the Lord by claiming it's a Lenten discipline I'm doing for him.

However, there is another side of that coin. If you think, for example, that alcohol or chocolate interfere with your relationship with your Lord or your family, or are harmful to the body God gave you, then those things certainly would be appropriate candidates for Lenten disciplines.

And alcohol and chocolate are only two frequently-used 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 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.

IV.

At the end of this homily I will invite you to the observance of a holy Lent. The words in our service will describe it as a Lent of self-examination and repentance, of prayer, fasting, and self-denial, and of reading and meditating on God's holy Word.

Those are the ways we seek God's will for us, and they are the ways through which the Holy Spirit makes that will known to us. They are the things we can do to help us draw closer to God.

I will repeat that—"they are the things we can do to help us draw closer to God." The key words are "draw closer to God." If we take today's Gospel reading seriously, then drawing closer to God will be the reason behind what we have decided to give up, or start doing.

V.

So, today's Gospel emphasizes not only what we do, but also why we do it. And sometimes looks can be deceiving. Like the hypocrites, we can be tempted to look and act and sound like something we are not. But what's in our hearts is what counts.

And our hearts will tell us that Lent is a time of preparation and transformation. It is not a time just to check some boxes on a list. By remembering our Lord's suffering and death, we are enabled to see more clearly and to avoid the obstacles to a holy life that the world places in our path.

At the end of the day, 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 approach this Lenten season as our Lord intends. We will do the right things for the right reasons, and we will live more completely into the life our Lord holds out to us. *Amen.*