

Ash Wednesday – Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 –

*“How is it with your Soul?”*

Matthew begins chapter 6 on the tail end of chapter 5, where Jesus says: “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” But now Jesus says: “Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them.” It seems odd and confusing simply because these verses are opposite and contradictory. Are we supposed to be a secret Christian or an evident Christian? We cannot be both! Right? Or can we? So basically, let your light shine, but make sure you keep it a secret! What are we supposed to do with that? Before I go any further, let’s pause to pray.

*Almighty God, invite us deeper into your world, your people, and your Lent. May this time be one of outward focus, seeking you in those we often ignore. Help lived a Lent focused on freedom, generosity, and encounter. Give us hearts hungry to serve you and those who need what we have to give. In this, we pray, Amen.*

We need to understand that Jesus is addressing two different issues. In Matthew 5, Jesus addresses our influence in the world and says that we must be different from the world to change the world. Here in Matthew 6, Jesus addresses the motivation of our hearts. Why do you do what you do? What is our motive? Is it to give God glory or to gain glory for ourselves? Well, Jesus is showing us the difference between

hypocritical and authentic righteousness. It is essential not only that we do the right thing but also that we do it in the right way and for the right reason. Righteousness is an inward matter. God does not look at the outward act but at the heart. Jesus begins with a strong warning: “Be careful!” Maybe we could translate it better by saying, “Beware.” Jesus lets us know that we are entering dangerous waters where there is a real danger and where our motivation is wrong. So, Jesus warns us to be constantly watchful.

What is the issue? Our motivation and our heart. It all comes down to who gets the praise. Do we get the praise, or does God get the praise? How is it with our souls if we do good work to get praise? The answer comes from Jesus, who says you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. We must put God first in all things. But then Jesus applies his warning to the three areas of giving, praying, and fasting. Three essential duties in every world religion, and in particular, important to ancient Judaism. In each area, Jesus says there is a right and wrong way to give, pray, and fast. In many ways, we try to be like God, and in the brokenness of our lives, we have blind spots that lead us to a self-focused life, leading us to a labor of sin where we become exhausted. We are here tonight to wash our faces. It is about reconciliation, where we seek healing and a renewed relationship with God.

We are here at the very foot of God’s throne, begging to be taken away and cleansed.

Tonight, as we begin the season of Lent, these 40 days of opportunity to think about where our heart is, this is the question that confronts us. How is it with your Soul? Or, to put it in the words of Jesus, where are our hearts? When we think of hearts, we associate the word “heart” with Valentine’s Day and romantic love. Still, in Scripture, the Bible describes the heart as an image of the self at a deep level, in more profound ways than our perception, intellect, emotion, and desire.” There are many things that we treasure, many things that are meaningful to us, but they all have minimal value.

Lent asks us to consider which of these earthly treasures might be getting in the way of our relationship with God. The key to Lent is deepening our relationship with God. It is a spiritual practice, a way of drawing closer to living out faith, rather than just a self-improvement tool. If we are not careful, Jesus warns, in practicing our faith, we should not concern ourselves with showing off to others in how much money we place on the offering plate or boasting about how much one does for the church to gain recognition, or prayers that over the top for others to overhear for if we do, we lose touch with the very theological foundations of our faith. The season of Lent humbles us out of these ways and seeks to help us get our hearts back in the right place.

When we start to really look around us, we realize that our hearts are often surrounded by “treasures” that may, in fact, be building walls around us that close us off from God. And on top of those treasures, we

see all those other instances of ways in which we have become separated from the people God has created us to be. We notice our sinfulness, a painful reflection in the mirror, and the looming tower before us.

On this Ash Wednesday, as we begin to break down those walls of sinfulness, we are left with a mess of our bones that turns into dust. With each transgression, we die a little more. The dust of our mess marks us as we place ashes on our foreheads. We are reminded of our sinfulness and our mortality. We rub our futures plainly on the skin of our foreheads for the world to see. We stare our mortality in the face when we look at one another. At the same time, though, we are marked with the cross, a reminder of who we are, a God who not only sits on the hillside with us but went to that same cross that marks us this night for us so that sin and death would never have the final word. On this night, we can be marked with a sign of death because we know that we worship a God who can overcome it. Our ashes are a witness to our belief that we cannot do this on our own – we are solely and utterly dependent on God. God gave us this life, and then he claims it again.

What is our purpose and reason for being here? What is the meaning of why we do these things? Perhaps you never thought about that decision. Maybe you have been worshipping all of your life but never asked yourself why. Perhaps you have heard the call through worship and the scriptures to forgive, serve, welcome, and invest in

caring for one another but never really stopped to think about why you do these things. Maybe you never thought you had a voice to ask questions about their meaning. I encourage you to bring your “whys” to this place. I invite you to share your deep questions. Throughout the season of Lent, let us build a community that seeks meaning and purpose for our lived faith together. Again and again, Jesus is questioned in Scripture, and his responses show us that our questions, doubts, and uncertainties are treasured in the heart of God. Let us be like children in this season of Lent, humble and ready to grow into this kingdom that our Holy parent has proclaimed through the Son.

And so, as I come to a close, how is it with your soul? Tonight, let us begin on the path to rediscover a life of faith. We speak the words of the Psalmist in prayer, “Create in me a clean heart, O God,” expressing our desire to get our hearts in the right place again and humbly asking God to help us in that task. As we move forward in these 40 days of Lent, may we trust God to put a new and right spirit within us so that the treasures we have in this world, and indeed our very hearts, might also be with the Lord. Children of God, we are dust, and to the dust, we will return. This Lent, let us empty ourselves so that our Holy parent may breathe new life into this dust once again. Amen.