

Call to Ashes and Joy

Ash Wednesday Sermon by Bob Kuntz

Matthew 6:1-21; Isaiah 59 - selected vss 2-21-07

Since I encourage you to give things up for Lent, I think that you should know what I'm giving up. It's humbling to admit this. I'm giving up reading the paper at breakfast in the morning. Now that seems like a little thing. But I am NOT glad about giving up reading the paper. That's my time; it's how I start my day; it's my peace and quiet.

But I was convicted last week that God doesn't see it that way. Isaiah told the people of Israel, **"...your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you..."** (Isaiah 59:2). What came to me in prayer wasn't as strident as those words, but the message was the same. Claiming that time for myself blocks out God. He wants to have breakfast with me, but I'm busy reading the paper.

So while I'm not happy about this, I see God will use this for him. And I believe, after I get done grumbling, it's going to be a blessing and joy.

As Matthew records the Sermon on the Mount, he tells us that Jesus called for us to do three things: give to the needy, pray, and fast. Perhaps you noticed Jesus' words here. He did not say, "IF you decide to give to the needy, pray, fast." Jesus said, "WHEN you give to the needy, pray, fast." These are basics of our Christian life, of following Christ, of loving God and neighbor. This is how we live our faith, grow in faith, come closer to God.

This is the Scripture for Ash Wednesday – because these three things involve us humbling ourselves. Ashes are a Biblical sign of humbling our self. They're the Scriptural equivalent of someone from the South saying, "Well, shut my mouth." We wear ashes because we are all sinners and we all need God.

It's difficult for us to 'fess up sometimes. I felt that the first time I told you that I lose my temper Big Time with Libby and that I'd wrestled with depression for three years. We start to worry: "What will they think of me? Will they treat me differently? Will they judge me and decide I'm no good?"

Those things happen in the world. A politician says he's had mental health issues and he doesn't get elected. Someone says that they've had alcohol troubles and they lose their job. A person says they've had struggles in their marriage and people talk about them behind their back.

Beloved, this church family is not like that. We don't have to be afraid here. None of us is perfect. We don't come here to judge each other, but to be gentle with each other.

When we hide our failures and faults, we not only shut other people out, we shut God out. When we're open about how we've messed up, we let God in, to touch us, set us free, work in us. Other people can care for us, pray for us, and in that care and those prayers, God is at work.

Giving to the needy, praying, and fasting, all involve humbling ourselves. They're all like getting ashes smeared on our forehead. We can feel foolish doing these things.

In order to give, we have to humble ourselves. We renounce thinking that we are the most important person on earth, that life revolves around us, that "I'm #1." In giving to the needy, we say we're not superstars; we don't "deserve" this money. We're just regular people like everyone else. God has blessed us with talent, education, opportunity. The money we have comes from those blessings. Giving to the needy is a matter of faith, of trusting God. We give to others, and not hoard for ourselves, because we trust God will care for us. We put our self aside and open our heart to care for others.

Our gifts to the needy feed the poor, and help kids learn to read, and pay to dig wells in places where there's no clean water. Our gifts send Bibles to people in prison and blankets to the homeless. We give to others when we invite 12 step groups into the church so they have a place to meet and support each other.

In order to pray, we have to humble our self. Prayer is not going up to God and saying, "Here's my order! Do this for me today!" Prayer is knocking on God's door and saying, "Lord, could I talk to you?" Prayer is trusting God with our inmost thoughts and feelings – even the upset ones. Prayer is letting down our guard with God, letting God see us as we really are. (Of course, God always sees us as we really are. When we hide from God, we don't fool him. We just cut ourselves off from his fellowship and love.)

When we humble ourselves and say, "Lord, could I talk to you?" God says, "Of course, come in! I love you. I want to hear from you. That kind of stuff makes my day."

In the fellowship of prayer, we find ourselves strengthened and renewed. We receive a peace that passes understanding and direction for our lives. We experience that Jesus loves us and we are his precious family.

In order to fast, we have to humble our self. We give up providing for our self. We say, "I won't be in control today. I won't eat whatever I decide. I'll trust God to sustain me."

Over the past four years, I've listened to two Confirmation Classes talk about fasting. Their Muslim friends at school take fasting seriously. During the month of Ramadan, Muslims don't have anything to eat from sun-up to sun-down. Teens look at their Muslim friends fasting and say, "Their faith is important. It asks important things from you."

Throughout the centuries, followers of Christ have fasted. During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln called the whole nation to fast as a way of praying for the war to end. Only in our day have we gotten away from fasting.

We don't fast because the physical body is bad. Nor do we fast because we're guilty and have to punish ourselves. Jesus' disciples fast to grow close to God, to discern God's will, to call out to God and find unity with Him.

It sounds crazy, but this walk of humility, giving, praying, and fasting, is a road to joy. Don't we find joy in giving Christmas? Haven't we known joy in helping others, in seeing gifts make a difference in someone's life? Haven't we found, in times of prayer, the joy of being close to Christ? So, too, in fasting, there is a joy – not of tasting or eating, but of being strengthened and sustained by God, a joy of peace and being close to God.

During his forty days of fasting in the desert wilderness, Jesus surrendered himself to God. Let us join Christ in that surrender. Let us renounce putting our self first. Let us empty ourselves of the riches of earth so we can be filled with the riches – and joy – of heaven.