

PIETY FOR REAL

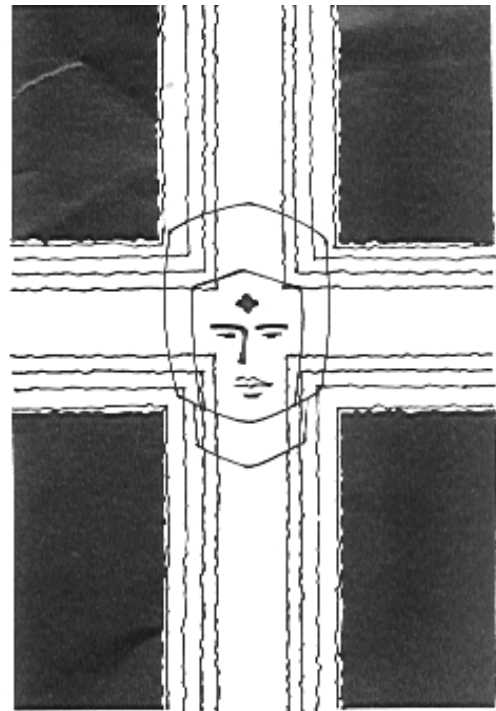
ASH WEDNESDAY 2008¹
ST. JOHN LUTHERAN CHURCH, BROOKLYN
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND
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A SERMON BY NEIL O'FARRELL, PASTOR

*Jesus taught, "For where your treasure is,
There your heart will be also."
Matthew 6:21*

Ash Wednesday puts me on the horns of a dilemma. Here is what stymies me. On a literal level, it's about reading Matthew's gospel in which we have an instruction that when we fast, we are to make it very private. Jesus specifically warns us against covering our heads in ashes. But even more than that "cosmetic" issue, I live—and preach—in the spirit of Easter. I believe we live in the reality of the Resurrection. Ash Wednesday intrudes on the rejoicing to which Christians hold fast that Jesus is alive and death has been vanquished. How can Ash Wednesday—the somber music, the sorrowful prayers, and the ashes—fit into our Easter theology?

I think I'm beginning to understand a little more about my difficulty. I think it hinges on the real difference between piety and pietism. Now, most of us don't think about piety. Our piety is experienced publicly in the life of the Christian community, and experienced privately, as private as a prayer we might utter of thanksgiving or concern in the span of a moment.

Piety is defined, among other things, as a reverence for God and devout fulfillment of religious obligations. The meaning of *pietism* is an exaggerated or ostentatious piety and religious zeal. While those are dictionary definitions, here's how the differences between piety and pietism come out in my mind. Piety is the genuine article, while pietism is all plastic and fake. Or in another way of looking at it, the audience for piety is God, while the audience for pietism is other persons. Piety comes from the heart, while pietism comes from our sense of obligation and out of a sense of theatre. This distinction between heartfelt emotion and sensibility, and false public affectation is the



¹ Ash Wednesday, Cycle C, 2008: Joel 2:1–2, 12–17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10; Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21.

heart of Jesus' teaching four our gospel from Matthew. The problem for all of us is to know the difference because we are past-masters at fooling ourselves.

We, in our hearts and minds, should have a pretty good idea of whether we're simply going through the motions, or whether we genuinely participate in the spirit of religious devotion, and in particular, Ash Wednesday. What is the spirit of Ash Wednesday? Well, I think it is a realistic appraisal of our tendency to fall short not only of God's expectations, but even of our own. In fact, if we don't think we're falling short of our own expectations, then we have some serious work to do in coming up with a new array of self-expectations. We need to set the bar higher.

We tend to see Lent as an obligation: a necessary road on the way to Easter. I think it would be better if we could see Lent not as an obligation, but rather as an invitation. An invitation to an honest soul-searching, a searing self-assessment of who we are and how we're doing in living out the teachings of Jesus.

I have made it my policy to read one book about preaching every year because preaching is at the heart of what I do as a pastor. This year's book is by my preaching professor Peter Gomes, and the book's title is *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus: What's So Good About the Good News?*² In this book, The Reverend Professor Gomes puts to rest the question that so many of us ask, typically falsely, of "What would Jesus do?" The question is false because the premise is false: we find ourselves in situations that Jesus never did, and we are not likely to be able to employ some of Jesus' answers to the challenges he faced or that we face today. We will never be scourged or crucified, and we likely will never cure someone of paralysis or blindness through prayer. Rather, the essential question for us to ask is what would Jesus have *us* do? That question is more to the point, and asking it requires us first to internalize Jesus' teaching, and then secondly to make the conscious decision to do as Jesus would have us do, as his followers. To do as Jesus would have us do is real piety and not false pietism.

But it's not easy. We know that Jesus' life and choices were not easy, and were we to follow Jesus' teachings, I would daresay that life wouldn't be very easy for us, either. When confronted with the face of poverty, in front of us with outstretched hand, what would Jesus have us do? When someone asks us for help, and the assistance is plainly within our power to accomplish, even if it is inconvenient or we don't feel like it, what would Jesus have us do? For many of us, knowing Jesus' teachings as we do, what choices will we make when we vote in this year's upcoming elections? In other words, how would Jesus have us vote? I suspect we know the answer to that question even though our politics may be someplace else for whatever justification.

I think at it's best, Lent invites us to integrate the person we appear to be with the person we recognize when we look deep into our hearts. It's so easy to become scattered, frustrated, dis-integrated, and overwhelmed with unmet good intentions. I know for myself that I commit to things I don't have time to follow-up on, and I make promises that are unfulfilled because something else intrudes, or I just plain forget. It's easy to become overwhelmed, discombobulated, and anxious. If we allow this situation to continue, we can become even pathologically disturbed.

² HarperOne, 2008.

Thus, I would encourage all of us to re-center ourselves, to give ourselves more time, to let ourselves off the hooks we place ourselves on or allow others to place ourselves on. I think the best lenten practice we might take up is to simplify our lives in a way that puts Jesus and our true selves at the center.

I will end with a short story. There was an Episcopal priest who was feeling overwhelmed in the ways that I just described. She determined that her Lenten discipline was going to say “no” to doing any new things that would take her away from her family and parish, her prayer and study. Shortly after making this commitment to herself, she got a call inviting her to speak at a prestigious conference at a tony resort, all expenses paid, and with a generous honorarium to boot. She realized that if she said no, that the offer would not soon repeat itself, and it was the kind of public exposure that could only enhance her pastoral career. She swallowed hard, and turned the invitation down. She felt it was more important to honor her commitment to herself than it was to toy with fame and fortune by attending the conference.

God sends us difficult choices, not to frustrate and tease us, but to teach us what is important and how to take care of ourselves and our life’s mission. Focus on the cross on our foreheads. We have been marked by the cross of Jesus, and claimed by God as God’s own. Pretty much beyond that, save for our own sacred souls and our families, everything else is but unnecessary filagree. All of us: let us use this Lent as an opportunity to return to the basics. The Lenten invitation is to: Simplify, simplify, simplify.

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