

A Sermon Preached by Fr. Edwin Smith
For Ash Wednesday, Year B
February 25th, 2009 at St. Thomas, Menasha

Today we begin Lent. We do so with a sense of humility. Lent was originally a period of preparation for Easter baptisms. Converts were instructed during this time in the early church, and they fasted and prayed. The climax came on Easter eve, with baptism and the joyous celebration of the Resurrection.

Ash Wednesday begins the forty days of our preparation for Easter, now. Lent is not preparation for Good Friday, but for Easter. In the church's memory Of Christ, Easter precedes Good Friday. Any Lenten discipline, any Lenten Practice of piety is to shape us to live the resurrected life in Christ. And that is what our Gospel lesson is all about.

Jesus talks to his disciples about the practice of piety. You are not unusual if you hear this lesson and wonder about the practice of wearing ashes on your forehead. However, what Jesus is urging the disciples not to do is to Practice their piety so that they will be praised by others. He wants them to Practice their piety in such a way that others will be helped and God's name be Glorified. His real concern is motivation.

He speaks first about almsgiving. There is evidence that in the Synagogue, the amount given and the giver's name were announced, with a trumpet Fanfare for especially large donations. (i wonder if we should try that?)

Jesus was saying that giving, Christian giving, is so that others might have, not for us to gain the esteem of others. In fact, it's supposed to be so secret that the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing. That's an Anatomical impossibility, but the image is of giving that eliminates any system of measuring what one gives.

Jesus urges the same thing in prayer. Don't pray in public places. Again, some of us confuse this with saying grace in a restaurant. That is not What Jesus means. Again, motivation plays a big part. We are to pray not so others can see how prayerful we are, but so that God's will can be done.

The same is true of fasting. It should not be a public occasion. Our Faces should not have that famished look. Instead, we are to wash our faces and anoint our heads, as if we were preparing for a feast, because real repentance is not just sorrow for our sin but joy in a new way of life.

But all these illustrations of piety are not nearly as important as the deeper point Jesus is trying to make with his disciples. More profound than our Almsgiving, how we pray and fast, is our renunciation and self-denial. Jesus is Inviting the disciples, and us, to renounce ourselves for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Because we are in Christ, we can renounce the self; we can so "no" to the ego that is always looking for public affirmation. This is not only a Lenten discipline; it is living the baptismal life; crucifying the old and bringing the new to life. There is a story about an old Arab judge who was known for his great wisdom. One day a shopkeeper came to him to complain that goods were being stolen from His shop, but he was unable to catch the thief.

The judge commanded that the door of the shop be taken off its hinges, Carried to the marketplace, and be given fifty lashes, because it failed to do its duty of keeping the thief out of the shop.

Well, you can imagine that a rather large crowd gathered to see this unusual punishment being carried out. When the lashes had been Administered, the judge stooped and in a loud voice asked the door who the thief was. Then, he put his ear to the door, the better to hear what it had to say.

When he stood up, he announced, "the door declares that the burglaries have been committed by a man who has a cobweb on top of his turban." instantly, The hand of one man went to the top of his turban. His house was searched, and the stolen goods recovered. The moral of the story is that all it takes is a Word of flattery or a word of criticism to uncover the ego.

Renunciation of the self during Lent is more than the renunciation of some petty habits. It is more than giving up cigarettes, Sweets, desserts, alcohol. As valuable as that may be, renunciation has to do with more serious things. When we renounce ourselves, we forget about the Public praise of who we are. We renounce a whole way of life, of attitudes, Values, perspectives. We are saying "no" to the attitude that we are better than others; "no" to the idea that God only answers some peoples prayers; "no" To the perspective that our way is the only correct way.

In our baptismal liturgy, we renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces Of wickedness that rebel against God, the evil powers of this world which Corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, the sinful desires that draw one from The love of God. This is a renunciation with a purpose beyond itself. It is a Renunciation which fosters living the Easter vision. It is a renunciation which extends the Lordship of Jesus Christ and promotes and fosters love. It is a Renunciation of all that impedes my being a servant to my neighbor. "May you have a holy Lent." with these words the church calls us to Begin our preparation for Easter. Nothing that we do in Lent will make us more Acceptable to God. He has already accepted us in the saving work of Jesus Christ. Our practice of piety is to glorify God, not so much by the giving up of something as by the taking up of something--the cross of the risen Christ--and following him.