

GOSPEL READING pg. 34-35

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18 (*The Message*)

<sup>6</sup> “Be especially careful when you are trying to be good so that you don’t make a performance out of it. It might be good theater, but the God who made you won’t be applauding.

<sup>2-4</sup> “When you do something for someone else, don’t call attention to yourself. You’ve seen them in action, I’m sure—‘playactors’ I call them—treating prayer meeting and street corner alike as a stage, acting compassionate as long as someone is watching, playing to the crowds. They get applause, true, but that’s all they get. When you help someone out, don’t think about how it looks. Just do it—quietly and unobtrusively. That is the way your God, who conceived you in love, working behind the scenes, helps you out.

<sup>5</sup> “And when you come before God, don’t turn that into a theatrical production either. All these people making a regular show out of their prayers, hoping for stardom! Do you think God sits in a box seat?

<sup>6</sup> “Here’s what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won’t be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace.

**16-18** “When you practice some appetite-denying discipline to better concentrate on God, don’t make a production out of it. It might turn you into a small-time celebrity but it won’t make you a saint. If you ‘go into training’ inwardly, act normal outwardly. Shampoo and comb your hair, brush your teeth, wash your face. God doesn’t require attention-getting devices. He won’t overlook what you are doing; he’ll reward you well.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

**Thanks be to God!**

***“Shattered”***

What a privilege it is to recognize the importance of the rituals that mark our relationship with God and neighbor. We have come to see Lent as the time to focus on our spiritual development so that in our humility and humanity, strength and faithfulness, we can reach out to others. This is not a season of depression and gloom, but a season of sober and serious consideration of who we are and how we can open ourselves to the grace of God that is waiting for us. We begin this season confessing our brokenness, and commit to embarking on a journey toward healing and wholeness.

The beginning of this journey is marked with ashes, the sign of our mortality. There is wisdom in these ashes. If you have ever been near death yourself, or have been with a loved one at their time of death, you know the clarity that an awareness of bodily limits can bring. At such times, what is most important in life rises to the surface. This is one of the opportunities of this Lenten season: to realign one’s priorities. In remembering that we will all die, we are called to remember God who is the source of our life.

When we are marked with ash on our foreheads, we hear the invitation to “repent and believe the good news.” One of the Hebrew words of “**repent**” is *nacham*. The root of this word means “**to draw a deep breath,**” **as well as to be deeply moved to a feeling of sorrow.** The Greek word for “repent” in *metanoia*, which means “to reconsider.” But it is also a compound word made up of the words “meta” and “nous.” “Meta” means “transformation” and “nous” means “soul.” So, as we begin this journey, we are invited to nothing less than a “transformation of the soul.”

And why would one’s soul need to be transformed? Because, when we are honest with ourselves we have to admit our brokenness. In our humanness, we have all fallen short of God’s glorious intention for our creation. In ways that are overt or subtle, we have each participated in and perpetuated the pain of this world. Perhaps we have offered words that harmed another, or we may have remained silent in the face of injustice. Perhaps our attitudes were prejudiced, leading to the withholding of love, resources, or opportunities for others. Perhaps we looked at another and saw only the flaws, failing to recognize potential, learnings, skills, value, and healing. Perhaps our actions did more harm than good. And the list could go on and on. Ash Wednesday is a yearly ritual because every year, if not every week and every day, we must acknowledge our shortcomings. And so every year we are challenged to look deeply and honestly at who we are, compare that with who God has created us to be, recognize our faults, and seek forgiveness and healing.

Because of sin, we are cracked, chipped, marred, broken, even shattered. Because we are mortal, we will not live on this earth forever. And so the attitude that states, “Oh well, I will get it right someday,” may or may not ever come to fruition. Any one of us could be called home tonight. That proverbial “someday” may never come.

So, this day, we remember that God created us from dust, and to dust we shall return. And if we repent and believe the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we have the opportunity for healing, mending, a fresh start, a new future in Christ.

In today’s gospel text, Jesus warns us against practices that are done for their visibility. He calls us to examine the integrity and intention of our actions. Lent is not a second chance at New Year’s resolutions. Give yourself the permission and space to recognize the changes that God desires for each life, expressing repentance and embarking on a journey of discovery, love, healing, and care. Trust that the God who creates and loves us walks beside us on this journey toward healing and wholeness on this and every day. Amen.