

March 6, Ash Wednesday (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21)

Often our spiritual practices are one more way we refuse to see that all is grace.

by [Winn Collier](#) in the [February 13, 2019](#) issue

Liturgy does some of its best work when it makes us squirm, when it makes us ask, *Is this scripture talking about me?* In our congregation's Ash Wednesday liturgy, we read Matthew 6 immediately before the imposition of ashes. Just before we encourage the community to stream forward and, in front of everyone, declare their repentance and commence their fast as black soot blemishes their forehead, we hear these disconcerting words: "Beware of practicing your piety before others Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting." Awkward. The Bible regularly creates tensions like this, and it's healthy to allow the discomfort to stretch taut as long and often as possible.

We like to make certain our good deeds hit the public radar. Some of us like to have our name emblazoned across an impressive edifice or have our matching donation noted by the vestry. Some of us want to make certain our protests and positions are strategically broadcast over our social media feed. Some of us feign disinterest but silently yearn for our simplicity or spiritual practice or prophetic posture to be recognized and revered. It's remarkable how often religious devotion gives prime opportunity for self-obsession.

Jesus, who never pulls any punches when confronting religious image-builders and power-players, highlights the hypocrisy overwhelming so much of our virtuous activity. Some make a spectacle of dropping wads of cash in the collection plate in hopes that "they may be praised by others." Some offer voluminous, eloquent prayers while keeping one eye open to make sure folks are paying attention, anxious "to be seen by others." Then there are those who take on a rigorous fast but add a little drama, checking themselves in the mirror to make certain they appear appropriately grim and pious because the point of it all, of course, is "to show others" their impressive diligence.

We discover that far too often the prayer or the giving or the fasting is only a ruse, an opportunity to achieve what we're really angling for: notoriety and kudos. The sad conclusion, Jesus says, is that none of these folks who are working the system with such ferocity receive any lasting benefit from their feigned righteousness. The praise is short-lived, empty. It's a futile game.

We read Matthew's text as we embark on our Lenten journey because for centuries Christians have approached Lent by practicing prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, exactly the things Jesus emphasizes in his unsettling rebuke. To be sure, the scriptures provide abundant encouragement for us to pray often, to be lavish in our generosity, and to surrender the nourishment we require to live—all acts of humility and provocative dependence before God. But we humans have a penchant for grasping whatever's available to us, even our acts of devotion, and manipulating them in service to our relentless, futile efforts to control our image, our future, our life. These Lenten disciplines are a gift, concretely reminding us of our vulnerability without—and unshakable hope in—God. However, too often we use our spiritual practices as one more grinding attempt to secure our life on our own terms.

Jesus' argument seems to be that we generally get what we want. If we're aiming for public adulation, then OK, we'll likely achieve it; but our success will prove thin gruel. However, if we desire something deeper and more potent—if what we really long for is God and the life God promises—then we'll have to abandon our scheming efforts (even our religious ones) to create our own well-being. Jesus is not primarily interested in whether we act in public or in private but rather in whether or not we have the audacity to surrender, to trust him with our life.

In Matthew 6 we sit at the center of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, inaugurated by the Beatitudes—wisdom on how to be blessed, how to live the good life, how to be happy. After offering bewildering words (“blessed are those who mourn,” “love your enemies,” etc.), Jesus digs deeper. Just as our happiness arrives in ways we would never concoct on our own, so also our well-being can never be secured by our piety or diligence. This stretch of Matthew's Gospel turns our world topsy-turvy line by disconcerting line, insisting that if we want to be whole and want our life to be truly good and meaningful, we will have to let go of our life and trust God. Apparently, we will have to surrender even our righteousness, our noble acts of discipline and obedience. Any suggestion of self-reliance is a lie. Everything is grace.

So we sit at the brink, fearful that we'll lose everything if we free fall, trusting nothing at all save God's kindness. And here, perilously exposed, we discover the fabulous wonder: God sees us. God is with us. Three times, Jesus utters the antidote to our frantic machinations: "The Father sees . . ." We don't have to cobble together a meaningful life. We don't have to fret over our limited resources. We don't have to display our spiritual acumen or make sure our reputation glimmers. We can surrender our body, our money, and our future, our reputation and our spirituality—all of ourselves.

The power of Lenten disciplines is not that they summon us to double down on self-effort but just the opposite. Lent invites us to embrace the truth that we all exist in the terrifying, beautiful predicament of being absolutely in the hands of divine mercy.