February 17, Ash Wednesday (Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21)

The distinctions between how we love God, neighbor, and self are not terribly thick.

by MaryAnn McKibben Dana in the February 10, 2021 issue

On Wednesday, February 26, 2020, people around the world gathered in churches and received a smear of ashes on their foreheads. Others going about their lives encountered a clergyperson, perhaps wearing a stole over a thick winter coat and cupping a small bowl in one hand, and decided on a whim to receive ashes to go.

Barely two weeks later, COVID lockdowns swept over the United States, making that smear of ashes one of the last liturgical actions many of us experienced person to person, skin to skin, before our long period of social distancing, mask wearing, and worrying over case positivity rates. It's fitting, perhaps, that a reminder of our mortality would be the setup for what has been an unflinching season highlighting our own vulnerability.

Our reading from Matthew is a strange passage to read on Ash Wednesday. It feels so didactic, such a contrast to the wordless wonder of sitting in a darkened sanctuary with our humanness on messy and embarrassing display—our mortality literally scrawled across our faces. These instructions from Jesus seem more suited to a Sunday school classroom than a service designed to invite us to contemplate the mysteries of life and the inevitability of our own deaths. What do the picayune forms of our devotion matter when staring into the existential abyss?

In this bit from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs his listeners in almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. In a way, the three actions being explored here span the full range of the spiritual life. Is this Jesus' attempt at midrash of the Great Commandment? We love God by uniting with God in prayer. We love our neighbor by sharing our resources sacrificially. We love ourselves through fasting from that which takes us away from God, those physical hungers which can never fully satisfy us.

Just as in the commandment itself, however, the distinctions between how we love God, neighbor, and self are not terribly thick. Giving alms is a way of serving others, to be sure, but it's also a means by which we show love for God: we cannot love God without also loving the world God cherishes. Prayer may be communication with God, but it also allows us to love our neighbor and ourselves because of the ways it changes us, conforming us more to the image and likeness of Christ. Jesus' words about fasting were likely meant to refer specifically to abstaining from physical sustenance. But in modern versions of fasting, people often deprive themselves of some tangible item, then use the money they would have spent on it to serve others. The three subjects here (whether God, neighbor, and self or almsgiving, prayer, and fasting) are not distinct points on a triangle, but circles on a Venn diagram with significant overlap.

What unites the activities in the passage is the *manner* in which they should be done. We are not to trumpet our own goodness with puffed-up displays of piety but to engage in them modestly, even secretly. Jesus' words call to mind the Messianic Secret, primarily exemplified in Mark, in which Jesus responds to his followers' acclamations and praise with a holy shush, chastising them against telling others what they know.

Secrets are slippery things. I recently rewatched *Spotlight*, the 2015 film dramatizing the *Boston Globe*'s investigation of the Catholic Church's cover-up of child sexual abuse by priests. Secrecy permeates the whole sick enterprise, from public legal documents that can't be found to arraignments that should have taken place but mysteriously didn't. At one point a reporter asks a victim if he ever told anyone about the molestation. He responds, "Like who, a priest?" A reader may be forgiven for feeling queasy about a God who sees in secret and rewards actions that are taken, or endured, behind locked doors.

The issue is complicated in a world that, more and more, exists online. At its best, the community we find on the internet helps us stay accountable to our best intentions. I may pray more regularly if I'm in a Facebook group encouraging the practice, for example. At our worst, we readily give away our right to privacy—to secrecy—for the sake of ever more targeted online advertisements. We occupy a social media environment in which posts are rewarded with likes, shares, and their accompanying hits of dopamine. If a loaf of homemade sourdough isn't Instagrammed, does it even count? Yet during the past year, we have been called upon to stay away from one another out of safety and necessity. Secrecy has been

both more plentiful (we are sequestered in our homes) and less so (I can easily see your choice of wallpaper, knickknacks, and pets).

Don't be like the hypocrites, Jesus warns, getting to the heart of the matter. It's less important where these activities take place than our purpose in doing them; secrecy simply functions as the blunt instrument to keep us from doing the right things for the wrong reasons. Do we seek to glorify ourselves, or God? Are we focused on how we look to others, or on what God sees?

These distinctions, too, are complicated. People of color are quick to remind those of us who are White that good intentions don't get us off the hook. It's the impact that matters most. I may post my daily Lenten prayer practice or announce some 40-day almsgiving challenge, with the intent of bringing others along on the journey with me, but its impact may be to call attention to myself. Still, like Thomas Merton, who believed his desire to please God did in fact please God, intent is all I really have. Perhaps Jesus' injunction not to store up treasures on Earth gives us some freedom to risk boldly that grace may abound. We offer our treasures to heaven in our own imperfect ways, trusting God will find our hearts residing in those unguarded, all-too-human moments.