

Ash Wednesday Meditation
Scripture: Matthew 6:16-21
Ash Wednesday, February 22, 2023
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Tonight's scripture comes to us from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:16-21. Hear now the word of God.

¹⁶ "And whenever you fast, do not look somber, like the hypocrites, for they mark their faces to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ¹⁹ "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Amen.

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

The title of the meditation: The Empty Pot

Let us pray: Loving God, as we begin Lent in your holy presence, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

In Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is concerned about the matters of the heart...about being honest with ourselves and one another. We must be careful not to misunderstand Jesus' teachings as advising people to stop praying, giving, or fasting...these are important rituals that touch our hearts as children of God. However, Jesus warns against a public display of religion, hypocrisy and trying to impress others by acting like we are better than we really are.

This evening we have selected a child's book to share because it sheds light on the matters of the heart and being honest with ourselves and each other. The book entitled The Empty Pot by Demi is a Chinese folktale retold.

It is a story about a boy named Pong who lived a long time ago in China. Ping loved flowers. Anything he planted burst into bloom as if by magic.

Everyone in the kingdom loved flowers, too. They planted them everywhere. The emperor loved flowers as well. He tended his own garden every day. But the Emperor was very old. He needed to choose a successor to the throne. How would the emperor choose? Because the Emperor loved flowers, he decided to let the flowers choose.

The next day a proclamation was issued. All the children in the land would be given special flower seeds by the emperor. Whoever can show their best in a year's time will succeed the emperor. The news created great excitement in the land. All the parents wanted their children to succeed and the children, also, hoped to be chosen.

When Ping received his seed, he was the happiest child of all. He was sure he could grow the most beautiful flower. Ping filled a flowerpot with rich soil. He planted the seed very carefully. He couldn't wait to see it sprout. Day after day passed, but nothing grew in his pot. Ping was very worried, so he put new soil into a bigger pot and transferred the seed into the rich black soil. He waited another two months. Still nothing happened. By and by the whole year passed.

Spring came and all the children put on their best clothes to greet the emperor. They rushed to the palace with their beautiful flowers, eagerly hoping to be chosen. Ping was ashamed of his empty pot. He thought the other children would laugh at him. His clever friend ran by, holding a great big plant. 'Ping,' he said, 'You're not really going to the emperor with an empty pot, are you?' Ping's father overheard this and said, 'You did your best and your best is good enough to present to the emperor!' Holding his empty pot, Ping went to the palace.

The emperor was looking at the flowers, slowly, one by one. How beautiful the flowers were but the emperor was frowning and did not say a word. Finally, he came to Ping. Ping hung his head in shame, expecting to be punished. The emperor asked him, 'Why did you bring an empty pot?'

'I planted the seed you gave me and I watered it every day but it would not sprout. I put it in a better pot with richer soil but still it wouldn't grow. I bring an empty pot because this is the best I can do.'

When the Emperor heard these words, a smile spread across his face and he put his arm around Ping. 'I have found him,' he exclaimed, 'the one person worthy of being emperor. Where you got your seed,' he said to the rest, 'I do not know for all the seeds I gave out had been cooked. It was impossible for them to grow. I admire Ping's great courage to appear before me with the empty truth and now I reward him with my entire kingdom and make him Emperor of the land.'

What made Ping so exceptional to the emperor was his honesty with himself and others about who he was. Ping was faithful to his best even when it appeared to be "an empty pot." Because the Emperor was more concerned with the matters of the heart than outward appearances, in the empty pot he saw the fullness of Ping's honest heart.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explains this is also the way God sees things. Like the Emperor, God is more concerned with the matters of the heart...about our being honest with ourselves and one another. As the children of God, it truly is not about whether we win or lose but how we live our life. We are called to give our best, to walk with integrity, to accept our limitations, and to ask forgiveness for the things we do that are wrong and hurtful, like Ping. That is what we are about tonight, gathered as the children of God, young and old, foolish and wise, spontaneous and well ordered, We are here to own our humanity, honor our limitations, and be honest about the empty places in our lives. We are here to come face to face with our God, the God of the ages, the God of the empty cross, and the God of the loving heart. Amen.