

Ash Wednesday Meditation
Wednesday, March 5, 2014
Scripture Readings- Isaiah 58:1-5, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
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Ash Wednesday begins the season of lent---the forty days we prepare for Holy Week, representing the forty days that Christ spent fasting and praying in the wilderness preparing for his ministry...an inward journey into his heart was necessary before the outward journey of his ministry. A ministry which culminated with his entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the last supper, his trial, crucifixion and resurrection. The season of lent for Christians is a time to return to God, to prepare our hearts and minds in prayer and honest reflection about who we are as we journey toward Holy Week.

In our first scripture reading Isaiah 58:1-7, the prophet reminds us that performing religious practices without changing one's behavior toward God's ways is not enough. During the exile in Babylon, the Hebrew people developed customs of fasting since they could no longer fulfill the obligation of temple sacrifices. Here God says that fasting does no good if it does not change people's hearts. True fasting is to free those who are oppressed and feed those who are hungry. Hear now God's word.

1 Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. 2 Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. 3 "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. 4 Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. 5 Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? 6 Is not this the fast that I choose: to loosen the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Amen.

Our second scripture reading is found in the gospel of Matthew, chapter 6, verses 1-6. As we enter into a time of prayer and honest reflection, Jesus warns us not to make a spectacle of our personal piety. Our relationship with God is personal and private. Hear now God's word.

1 "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. 2 "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. 4 so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 5 "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

16 "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as 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 title of the meditation: "Journeys of the Heart"

Text: For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Matthew 6:21

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, thank you for inviting us to an inward journey of the heart and for caring enough to ask the difficult questions on that path. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The prophet Isaiah joins the chorus of biblical writers throughout the ages who ask the difficult questions; questions that make us uncomfortable, questions that invite us to go beyond the superficial, beneath the surface, questions that speak to our heart and call for an honest response. In our hurried lives, too often these questions are not asked, not heard, let alone contemplated, amid the activity and busyness of our days.

Lent is a time to step back, to invite silence into our lives and to reflect on the questions that go to the heart of who we are. Lent is a time to live the questions. *Living the Questions* is a book of essays written in honor of the work of Dr. Parker Palmer who has spent a lifetime exploring the dynamic interplay between the inner life of the spirit and the outer life of work. Known as one of the nation's most thoughtful voices, he calls us to ways of being in the world that honor the human heart and promote a humane society.

He contends that we cannot have one without the other. The journey to inner wholeness gives us the courage and capacity to reach out to others in need and to live with integrity. Wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life. When we embrace our brokenness with honesty, we move toward wholeness. When we embrace our brokenness, we can accept the brokenness of others without being judgmental and pompous. Thank God for those people in our lives who keep us honest and who ask the difficult questions.

In Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is concerned about our inner wholeness, about the matters of the heart...not outward appearances. Jesus warns against a public display of religion, hypocrisy and trying to impress others by acting like we are better than we really are.

Many of us are familiar with the children's book *The Emperor's New Clothes* by Hans Christian Anderson. In this delightful story, we are reminded how silly we can become when we are not honest with ourselves or one another. Two tricksters arrive in town who claim to be weavers of beautiful clothes that are invisible to those who are foolish, incompetent or broken.

From the old minister to the footman to the clever members of the Emperor's court to the Emperor himself, all pretend to see what isn't there, for fear of being perceived as foolish, incompetent and broken. The Emperor continues to pay a great deal of gold for clothes the tricksters pretend to weave that don't exist on the empty looms.

The word about these fabulous clothes spreads throughout the town and the Emperor agrees to lead a procession in his magnificent clothes, strutting foolishly in nothing but his underwear. The people in the streets applaud when they see the emperor. Nobody wants to admit that they can't see anything because they don't want to appear foolish, incompetent or broken.

Suddenly a child cries out: *But the emperor has no clothes!*

Did you hear that? said an old man. *The child is telling the truth.* And one person whispered to another: *The emperor has nothing on at all.* The emperor was very embarrassed, for he knew they were right but who continued to strut because he didn't know what else to do. As for the tricksters, they hurried off with the foolish emperor's gold and were never seen again.

During this season of Lent, may we remember the emperor, who was more concerned with what others would think than trusting his own insight and who did not have the courage to take the journey of the heart and live the questions.

This children's story reveals how tragic it is when communities unwittingly conspire together and begin to believe things that are absurd. Thank God for the child among us and the child within us who speaks the truth, asks the question and keeps us honest.

Tonight we come together as children of God, young and old, dim witted and clever, spontaneous and well ordered, embracing our brokenness on a journey toward inner wholeness. We come to our God, who created us, who joined us in our humanity and to whom we belong in life and in death, the God of the ages, the God of the empty cross and the God of the loving heart. Amen.