

One of the things that snowstorms, like tonight's, do -- is allow you and me to gaze out at some very familiar surroundings -- and see well-known landscapes as if they were brand new.

We look at our lawns and trees and sidewalks -- that we know so very well -- And they take on a dramatically different image when they become covered in just a few inches of snow.

And that's not so very different than what happens to us when we hear Jesus' words in tonight's Ash Wednesday readings.

The well-known themes and words of the Christian story seem to come to us anew -- They take on an image that allows us to imagine our lives amidst a very different landscape.

I remember reading a study somewhere which was done on the origins of inventions.

And researchers found that people who lived in climates that changed a lot -- tended to invent a lot more things -- when compared to those who lived in areas that always remained somewhat the same.

Perhaps that's why the Church gives us its own seasons -- to help you and me look at the same things from a different angle -- through the spring, fall, and winter snow -- through our church, our sacraments, and our music, that the Kingdom of God is right here.

Perhaps that's why the Church gives us Matthew 6 for tonight's Gospel reading.

Tonight we heard a portion of that very familiar "Sermon on the Mount."

We heard warnings and "right behaviors" for all who would desire to see the Kingdom of God.

And on this night, Mother Church asks us to use them to examine our lives -- our words, and deeds and intentions -- Because in doing so, we move toward becoming more of the kind of people we so desperately want to become.

A people known for their honesty, integrity -- and most importantly -- love.

"Beware," begins the Master --

"Of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them..."

Jesus is assuring us that we are being watched.

You and I never perform to an empty auditorium -- There is always at least one person in the audience. -- And that One person witnesses our good nights and our gaffs -- our mis-steps and our masterpieces.

"Ash Wednesday"

RCL-A, Sunday, February 6, 2008

How often do we remember that God heard every word you and I spoke today -- The Lord heard us tell our loved ones how much we adore them -- The Lord heard us tear into those who annoyed or offended us -- even when nobody was around.

Jesus seems to be reminding us that God hears and sees it all -- the magazines, the secret glances, the lies, and the applause.

God saw when we stayed late at work, and when we left early.

We're never alone. -- And the One who we are most eager to impress is always sitting in the front row.

"How strange," we often wonder about ourselves -- "That we are so eager to play to the other members of the audience." -- How often we behave as if they were the ones we are to impress -- when we know that God is the only One we really want to hear say:

"Well done, my Good and Faithful servant."

Sure, we may sometimes be embarrassed that God is always watching -- But perhaps Jesus also wants us to know that God's eternal eye on us is actually a good thing.

How much must God love us when we are at the dead center of the Lord's gaze -- not a hair of our heads harmed without God's knowledge?

Jesus also says:

"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you."

This one isn't just about having the new wing of Beaumont Hospital named after us -- No, it's much more penetrating.

Jesus seems to be telling us about the importance of giving a gift with no strings attached -- Do we look to get something back from something we gave away for free?

"Dear Abby," the newspaper column read;

"My mother-in-law gave me a really ugly polka-dot, plaid, BLUE striped leisure suit for Christmas.

"My problem is that I want to return it-

"I only look good in polka-dot, plaid, GREEN striped leisure suits.

"But I know my mother in law will be offended if I exchange it.

"Signed, In-The-Doghouse."

"Dear In-The-Doghouse."

"Your mother-in-law has bigger problems than simply poor taste in casual attire.

"She is obviously not as interested in giving you a gift that you like -- versus giving you a gift she likes.

"In essence, she is not trying to make you happy -- as much as she is trying to make herself happy.

"The definition of a gift is something that is given with no strings attached.

"That means you are free to do with it as you will -- "wear it, burn it, exchange it, or smoke it --it doesn't matter because it's yours."

"Your Mother in Law's judgment on what you do with what is yours should be left to herself"

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"It seems to me that her motivation is not to love -- but to control."

"A true gift-giver never has the right to tell the recipient what to do or not to do with a gift."

Thank you, Abby.

And yes, my friends, Dear Abby and Jesus seem to suggest that you and I need to put away the trumpets -- the ones we use to blow our own tunes with -- in all of the subtle and not so subtle ways we play them.

Jesus wants to remind us of the number one most forgotten rule of the universe:

That there is a God, and we are not him (or her).
The Christian life is about not only remembering this --
but proclaiming it -- with trumpets, no less --
And we are not to blow our own, we are to blow God's.

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites..." -- "...for they love to stand and pray so that they may be seen by others."

Oh don't we all?

Look at the emergence of the "star" culture -- American Idol, reality TV -- Look at YouTube and MySpace -- and web cams that can (and do) show us most anything.

The entire world can look at us!

We all seemingly want to be seen by others (of course, this doesn't include Episcopalians, we're too shy!)

But Jesus asks you and I to ask why we want the world to look at us. -- Is it because we are so great and grand -- no, as we all know, it's because of the Jesus we serve is.

What Jesus seems to want to tell us is that the only one we should be concerned with seeing us -- is God.

God's approval is the only one we'll ever need -- and Jesus' message to every Christian is that we already have it.

"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces as to show others that they are fasting."

Doesn't this Ash Wednesday irony just make you chuckle?

Amidst this pretty obvious advice -- what's the first thing you and I do on Ash Wednesday?

Put big black X on our foreheads! -- Hmmm...

Which is why this sound, Ash Wednesday advice is always good to keep in mind -- when you and I wander back to our cars and ask ourselves -- "Now should I wash this cross off, or should I keep it on?"

As an old priest once told me:

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"If you're proud of it, wash it off."

"If you're ashamed of it, keep in on."

The point seems to be this -- When we try hard to keep a cheery countenance amidst our suffering, we are imitating Jesus.

When we keep from complaining -- even when it's warranted -- When we bite our tongues instead of gossiping -- We're living true to our Christian convictions -- When we live compassionately authentic lives -- we're living Jesus-like lives.

And that's what we're after anyway.

"Do not store for yourselves treasures in heaven..."

This is so hard for us to hear in our Capitalist economy

As we all know, our very economy demands that we continue to buy things -- even if we don't really need them. -- And so often our friends and family judge us by the kind and amount of things that we own.

Max Weber, a famous sociologist once said:

Once we get beyond having sufficient food, clothing and shelter -- our purchases are almost entirely based on the opinions of other people.

And these opinions are paraded in front of us like they're the only ones that matter.

Which is why you and I come here -- to remind ourselves that there is another opinion that matters -- and there is a community that will reinforce that -- no matter how bad the weather gets.

Finally, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"

These are perhaps Jesus' most cutting words of the passion -- They are cutting because they cut you and I to the heart -- And they are also His most helpful.

Just look around for a moment -- How hard was it for us to get to church tonight?

What kind of love for God and community and Christian commitment must we have to make it out on a night like this?

There must be some kind of treasure around here. -- One that we all recognize in our heart of hearts --

Yes, there is -- and that is where our hearts are.

It is a treasure that the world has spent two millennia seeking out -- and you and I will continue to do so through the next 40 days of Lent.

Tonight, it comes to us in a somber bid to keep our eyes open -- awake and sober -- discerning where the Holy Spirit is leading us.

And tonight that treasure comes to us in a wafer of bread and a sip of blood red wine.

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This is where our treasure lies.

O Lord, more and more, let it also be where our hearts always lie.

Amen.

Lessons:

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

2 Corinthians 5:20b, 6:10

Psalms 103

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21