

Ash Wednesday 2019
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
Lent – Alignment Time
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Jesus is inviting his followers to a life in which insides and outsides match perfectly because both are focused on a life with God who sees in secret. (NT Wright. “Matthew for Everyone Part 1” Publ. Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London.)

Perhaps if you have your own peach or apple tree in your yard this has happened to you. You cut into a peach or apple only to find that a worm has already gotten there first. They’ve enjoyed a nice meal and you will not be enjoying that lovely piece of fruit! Has that happened to you? The outside doesn’t look like the inside looks. Lovely color, lovely skin...oh no! Mushy, worm holes...well, you get the idea!

Perhaps my first real experience with this kind of thing is even a bit more graphic and gross, if you’ll abide my example. My family was vacationing in Hawaii and I found a small lizard on the balcony of our hotel room. Dad couldn’t turn down my eagerness for a little vacation pet and allowed me to keep it in a jar with some grass to eat. I think I even gave it a name!

Well in the next day or so, the lizard died. We left his jar out on the balcony and went out to see the sights. On the morning we were to leave, I was adamant that I wanted to take the dead lizard home – on the plane. To my amazement, I looked at Joe the lizard, and yelled at my dad to come take a look. “What are all those white things crawling around inside him?”

Yes....you don’t need any more explanation, do you?! Needless to say, my Dad was quite firm in saying that Joe wasn’t coming home on the plane with us!

Overnight, the lizard’s insides didn’t match his outsides anymore.

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.

Tonight each of us will be touched. Physically touched with a blackened cross. The ashes are made from last year’s Palm Sunday’s palm fronds. Burned and now turned to ash, their first form has changed. Once carried with shouts of joy, the leaves have died by fire and now mark our earthly form. They remind us that our current ‘outsides’, these fleshly bodies will one day be changed as death comes.

Yet it isn’t just a smudge that marks our flesh. It’s a cross. Jesus’ cross. The life of Jesus’ once very much alive, changed form as He went to the cross for us, to make our sinful inner selves, match our God given form.

Jesus is sharing with His disciples spiritual practices that will draw them close to God. First century Jews already knew about these practices for they were standard obligations: giving money. Prayer. Fasting.

Yet apparently, there were Jews who made certain everyone in the synagogue knew how much they gave. Their prayers were long and loud. They limped along so it was obvious when they were going without food.

So Jesus has a twist. Don't do these for show. Because your Father in Heaven sees in secret anyway. What matters is the kind of relationship you have with God when no one else is around, Jesus says. The difference is, "What is your motive for giving money, praying and fasting?" Does your inner life match the life you live when others are watching?

You likely know that many abusers often keep their victims quiet by making them keep secrets. The wife will abuse her husband at home; swearing at him, yelling at him, making him do everything she tells him. But out in public she is on the PTA board. She volunteers at church. If someone is sick, she is on the front porch with a casserole. Everything about her - clothes, hair, make-up, and kind words would never, ever reveal what kind of things happen in her home.

Does our inner life match our outer life?

You may already know that sin is an unpopular topic right now. There are clergy who will not tell their congregations that they are sinners. To do that would be unkind and unloving. Likewise people don't want to believe they are sinners, because they don't think they're actually that bad. Making mistakes is different from sin and everyone makes mistakes, right? So I'm not a sinner, I'm not a bad person, I just make mistakes.

Thank goodness as Lutheran Christians, we freely acknowledge that our inner lives don't regularly match our outer lives! Yes, I'm a sinner! Yes, we are sinners! Yes, you are a sinner. It sounds like a bad country music song, but it's true! As long as we journey in this earthly flesh, which God created, we will sin. We will commit acts that separate us from God. Secondly, we live in a state of being, called a sinful state, in which there is no release except through Jesus' death and resurrection. That's the truth. We're sinners.

In the upcoming confession, we admit to God, to ourselves and to everyone else present tonight that we as individuals and as a community have not loved God with our whole hearts. We have grieved the Holy Spirit. We admit we are self-indulgent. We don't pray as often as we ought, we don't share our joy filled life in Christ with others who so desperately want to hear a word of hope! We're wasteful. We're prejudiced and think unkind thoughts. We do this, am I right? I do this!

I'm a sinner, you're a sinner, we are sinners. Our insides don't match our outsides.

Well, praise, God! Why, because Jesus is our Savior! And He is telling us tonight how we can better align those two lives. Give and don't tell anyone. Pray – all by ourselves. Fast from anything that draws us away from God's loving presence. Fast from the iPhone. Fast from food or TV or gossip. I would certainly encourage us to share a Lenten discipline with an accountability partner if we need support, but we don't need to put our Lenten spiritual disciplines out on Facebook! God already knows our hearts. God knows that we desire to grow closer to Jesus. God knows and God loves – which is all the motivation we need. God knows us and loves us – which is all the motivation we need to give, pray and fast.

What a gift – this blackened cross. It's a reminder that there are days that our sinful self weighs us down. Like St. Paul writes, "I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...In fact, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it." (Romans 7:14-18)

What a gift – this blackened cross. Reminding us that God is calling us to more fully align our inner lives with His life and with His help. For indeed, that which is impossible for you and I, it's not impossible for God. Pray about wanting to give secretly. Pray about a desire to pray. Pray about whatever God is calling you to fast from. And our Glorious, Almighty God will bless our prayers and stick with us until the very end.

Because one day, yes one day, indeed we will all return to dust – and don't worry, we'll all be cremated or embalmed before the little white bugs come.

But on that day, because of Jesus' death, He will transform our inner and outer nature once and for all, into a glory beyond measure. A blessed Ash Wednesday to you.

Amen