

Where Our Hearts Find Rest

Michael Jenkins

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Several years ago a well-meaning young minister decided to enlighten his rural congregation by introducing them to a worship service he had learned about in seminary, Ash Wednesday. Up until then, this little country church had only known three High Holy Days in the Christian year: Christmas, Easter, and Mother's Day. But they liked their new pastor, and they decided to give the service a try.

The minister read the classic text prescribed for this day, the very same passage we just read from Matthew's Gospel. The congregation prayed, reminding themselves that God does not desire the death of a sinner, but rather that the sinner will turn and live. They sang the beautiful old gospel hymn, "Whiter Than Snow." It was a real nice service and everything had gone well until they got to the climactic moment.

Maybe with a little more instruction that would have gone alright too. But the minister in this case left too much unsaid. He simply stood up in the middle of the center aisle and invited the folks to come forward for "the imposition of ashes."

There were only six or eight church members at the service. And, as fate would have it, the first was an elderly elder who stepped forward with surprising agility and before the minister could say his words and make the sign of the cross on the old man's forehead with the ashes, the man beat him to it. Sort of. The elder dipped his own finger into the grey ash, stuck it in his mouth like it was a piece of communion bread, said, "thank you, preacher," and headed back to his pew gumming the ashes all the way.

The young pastor was so startled he had not re-gained his pastoral composure by the time the next congregant came forward and did the same thing the old man had done, and so it went until the end of the line. At that point the young pastor himself stood there alone weighing his options. And, then, instead of using the ashes to mark his own forehead, he made the plunge himself, and stuck his finger into the ashes and put his finger into his mouth.

And there they all sat, chewing on charcoal while the pianist played the introduction to the final hymn. (I've been assured by a very dubious source that at least some of this story is true.)

Religion, we are reliably informed by sociologists, is a collection of rituals, ceremonies and ideas to which people hold which in some way helps them to honor the divine. Religion can be good, bad or indifferent. We all know that. But the scripture before us today isn't about religion. This text is about something far more important than religion.

Jesus tells us that we need to be cautious about practicing our religion because it can get between us and God, and it can really make a hash of our relationships with other people. Along with Jesus's critique of giving offerings and praying and fasting, right in the middle of this long passage of scripture, traditionally read on Ash Wednesday, is the Lord's Prayer, and his teaching about forgiveness: "If you forgive, you'll be forgiven. If you don't, you won't." In other words, there's just no way to live receptive to grace and mercy if you don't learn to give grace and mercy to others.

Jesus is concerned that religiously-minded people - and I suspect that includes many of us - that religiously-minded people not become so preoccupied with looking like experts in the practice of their religion that they forget the point. Faith in God is not about impressing others. Faith in God is about learning where to place our hearts.

We might summarize the teachings of Jesus here very briefly:

Don't toot your own horn.

Don't indulge in holy babble.

Don't convert the joyful work of prayer and spiritual discipline into dismal toil so people will be impressed with you.

Instead:

Give quietly.

Pray secretly.

Fast joyfully.

And forgive lavishly.

And in this our restless hearts find rest in the only place where there's real rest, knowing that we are fulfilling something far more important than religious obligations.

Which reminds me of what our young pastor in the story did right. You know, he did something right. He joined his people in tasting the ashes, from which we came, and to which we all return. His professor of liturgics might have flinched at his actions. His classmates would probably have made fun of him. But, that Ash Wednesday, he discovered where his treasure was, and he placed his heart there. And there too we may we place our hearts. And let them rest.

Let us pray:

"Teach our restless hearts, O God, to rest in you. Amen."