

Be Aware

a sermon based on

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

(with reference to Exodus 34:29-35)

and delivered on

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Ash Wednesday

at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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Did any of you get that inkling of irony about coming to church tonight for Ash Wednesday, when you know that you will be leaving this building with a big, black, obvious smudge on your forehead – then we hear Jesus say, “Beware of practicing your piety before others... Make yourself look healthy and energetic when you fast... Pray – not just in private – but in secret...”? How do these things go together?

Think about it. It’s not just that this act of piety will be seen by others. It can ONLY be seen by others. Look up at your forehead right now. What do you see? Not your forehead.

The only way you can even see it yourself is to look into a mirror or to catch a glimpse in the reflection of a window or glass door. It just seems incongruous. But is it?

We’ve come to begin this season of Lent as a reminder of our need to claim the grace that Jesus offered us on the cross and offers us in his Resurrection. The mark we choose for that occasion is not one of pride, but contrition. Unlike an eloquent prayer, a “generous” and conspicuous gift, or the amazing willpower demonstrated in fasting – unlike these impressive activities – the mark that we choose – draws attention to our failures and our pathetic need for redemption.

Ultimately – this mark – testifies to our trust in God’s grace through Jesus Christ in a way that he alone is glorified. It’s in that knowledge – it’s in that promise that we are claiming even while we know we don’t deserve it – that God uses this moment – and this season of Lent so that we can claim good news of Easter with even greater gusto than we might otherwise.

This evening, I invite you to hear Jesus’ warning (if it is that) another way. When he says, “Beware,” hear it as “Be aware.” That’s actually where the word comes from – from the Middle English “Be ware” – “be on guard”, “be prudent”, “be wary”, “be alert”, “be aware.”

This is a great invitation. Too often we hear “beware” and we allow our fear to keep us from offering a prayer on behalf of the community; we allow our fear of being considered pretentious or condescending from sharing a blessing that we long to share; or we go to great lengths to hide our spiritual practices like fasting lest we embarrass ourselves in front of others – or maybe lest we violate God’s word.

But Jesus never said, “Don’t pray in public.” He never said, “Don’t help someone unless there’s absolutely no one around to see it.” He never said, “Make sure no one ever knows that you engage in piety.” What he does say is to be cautious – but to be cautious in another way. What he’s saying is to be aware of why you’re doing what you’re doing. Are you doing to draw attention to yourself? Or are you doing it because it’s just the right thing for you to do at that moment? Or maybe because it’s just the way you walk with Jesus?

One example that comes to mind is prayer before a meal time. Have you ever noticed when someone in a restaurant bows their head for a quiet moment of prayerful thanksgiving before digging in? Maybe you do it? I do? I even say a quiet prayer out loud when Susan and I are together. Do we imagine that that offends God? I don’t even think that offends non-religious people.

But then I’ve also seen the diners who make a spectacle of their prayer in a misguided attempt to witness their faith. They are doing so with the intention of drawing attention to themselves. Are they aware of that? Are they aware of how non-believers will respond to their ostentatious display? You all see the difference. Right?

Then there’s the other side. That’s being aware of the fact that others do notice. We’re only fooling ourselves if we think that our moments of arrogant pride go unnoticed for what they are. We’re only fooling ourselves if we think that our own sins don’t hurt others, or that we can keep them secret. We might convince ourselves that that’s the case because our quick examination of the situation seems to indicate that we’ve gotten away with something. But what we think is

hidden is noticed. Others do see the smudge that we can't see for ourselves without intentional reflection.

That is the invitation for tonight. Be aware. Be aware that others do notice. Be aware of what dangers might present themselves when you're inattentive to the spiritual practices through which you experience renewal in God's love.

Mostly be aware that these ashes will be gone long before Easter as we proceed with our own commitment to strive for holy lives that honor the One whose love for us would journey even through the grave towards life more magnificent than we can imagine.

Be aware of God's love and presence as you live this life with confidence in his faithfulness to all those whom he loves. AMEN.