

“Be Silent”

On Wednesday, February 26, 2020, people around the world gathered in churches and received a smear of ashes on their foreheads. Others going about their lives encountered a clergyperson, perhaps wearing a stole over a thick winter coat and cupping a small bowl in one hand, and decided on a whim to receive ashes to go.

Barely two weeks later, COVID -19 lockdowns swept over the United States, making that smear of ashes one of the last liturgical actions many of us experienced person to person, skin to skin, before our long period of social distancing, mask wearing, and worrying over case positivity rates. It is fitting, perhaps, that a reminder of our mortality would be the setup for what been an unflinching season highlighting our own vulnerability.

Today’s reading from Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21, for Ash Wednesday is a part of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus instructs his listeners in almsgiving, prayer and fasting. In a way, the actions being explored here span the full range of the spiritual life. We love God by uniting with God in prayer. We love our neighbor by sharing our resources sacrificially. We love ourselves through fasting from that which takes us away from God, those physical hungers which can never fully satisfy us.

Just as in the commandment itself, however, the distinctions between how we love God, neighbor, and self are not terribly thick. This concept is discussed by MaryAnn McKibben Dana, author of “*Sabbath in the Suburbs.*” Giving alms is a way of serving others, to be sure, but it’s also a means by which we show love for God; we cannot love God without also loving the world God cherishes. Prayer may be communication with God, but it also allows us to love our neighbor and ourselves because of the ways it changes us, conforming us more to the image and likeness of Christ. Jesus’ words about fasting were likely meant to refer specifically to abstaining from physical sustenance. But in modern versions of fasting, people often deprive themselves of some tangible item, like clothes or chocolate, then use the money they would have spent on themselves to serve others. The three subjects here (whether God, neighbor, and self, or almsgiving, prayer, and fasting) are not distinct points on a triangle but circles with significant overlap.

What unites the activities in the passage is *the manner* in which they should be done. We are not to trumpet our own goodness with puffed up displays of piety but to engage in them modestly, even secretly. Jesus’ words call to mind the Messianic Secret, when he and the disciples returned from the Transfiguration

mountain, in which Jesus responds to his followers' acclamations and praise with a holy shush, chastising them against telling others what they know.

This past year of more isolation has actually made it easier to obey Jesus' command of acting in silence. We have had less opportunity to trumpet what we might be doing. We have called others on the phone and prayed for them. We have probably not spent as much money going out to eat or to the movies, and maybe we have given the money we would have spent as contributions to help others. If we fasted, we did it in the confines of our home.

Think of the example of John Wesley. He normally got up each day (except Friday, his day off) at 4 am and prayed and studied scripture until 8 am when he had his breakfast. He fasted each Wednesday within the confines of his own home, not having a meal until 4 pm. He did not fast for forty days and forty nights and make it a public spectacle, but just for part of one day each week. He did it alone and did not trumpet it to others.

Don't be like the hypocrites, Jesus warns, getting to the heart of the matter. It's less important where these activities take place than our purpose in doing them; secrecy simply functions as the blunt instrument to keep us from doing the right things for the wrong reasons. The questions we need to reflect on are, "Do we seek

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to glorify ourselves or God?” “Are we focused on how we look to others or on what God sees?”

Today’s world offers us much opportunity for alms, prayers, and fasting. Many are in need. Many need our prayer. Many need our financial help. As we act, to build up our treasures in Heaven, our impact should not be to draw attention to ourselves but to bring glory to God. Amen!