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Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

Scripture: [Psalm 51:1-12](#)

Text: [Matthew 6:1-6,16-21](#)

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What we are doing may be wrong. I know that's an odd way to begin, particularly to the faithful few who have made it to Ash Wednesday service. So please know that I am grateful that you are here, ready to step into the ancient slipstream of Lent.

Maybe it would be better for me to say, there is something counter-intuitive about this service. You heard the lesson I just read. "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them." (Matthew 6:1a) Since we aren't here anonymously wearing leftover Mardi Gras masks, it is almost impossible for us today to sit in worship and not be seen. I could say, "Don't look around" but we all know that won't work. In fact, that invited you to look around and see who is here.

Lent is big in some traditions. But others, not so much. One local church is beginning their "in the movies" series. For them, Lent might as well be spelled with an "i". There is a reason. You can look as much as you want in your Bible and you won't find Lent. There is no such thing. There is some evidence that early Christians fasted forty hours between Good Friday and Easter, but the custom of spending forty days in prayer and self-denial did not arise until later when the initial rush of Christian adrenaline was over and believers had gotten very ho-hum about their faith.

When the world did not end as Jesus himself said it would, his followers stopped expecting so much from God or from themselves. They hung a wooden cross on the wall and settled back into their more or less comfortable routines. They decided there was no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christians. They decided to be nice instead of holy.

But then came a time in the history of the church when they realized that it wasn't enough. Faithful people decided to do something counter-cultural, radical. They looked to the Bible for clues as to why their faith didn't have the "umph" it once had. There they saw that Israel spent forty years wandering learning to trust God and that Elijah spent forty days in anticipation of hearing the still, small voice of God, that Moses spent forty days listening to God give the law, and Jesus spent forty days between his baptism and his ministry. This time of wandering and waiting – it was hard. It was necessary.

"So the church announced a season of Lent, from the old English word *lenten*, meaning 'spring' – not only a reference to the season before Easter but also an invitation to a springtime of the soul. Forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone. Forty days to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply for ourselves."¹

They launched it with this day called Ash Wednesday with passages that we read every year. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin." (Psalm 51:1-2)

And they grabbed on to the other passage, the one that is confusing about whether we should be here. "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them." (Matthew 6:1a) "Do things in secret, Jesus says and in secret, you'll be rewarded.

If we take it at face value, we've blown that challenge already today. Go to your room and shut the door sounds like scolding a child. But here we are praying in public. Are we disobedient children? Is our talk today sin? Maybe, although it isn't what Jesus was addressing in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount.

The prayer life of a devout Jew in the first century consisted of prayers spoken at 9 am, 12 noon and 3 pm. The most common formalized prayers were based on the Shema, "The Lord our God is one God, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul" and the Shemonēh esrei, also called the "The Eighteen", which incorporated eighteen prayers for various occasions. Both prayers were to be offered every day, regardless of where the people were or what they were doing. So if at the appointed hour, you found yourself in a public place, in the market or mall, you suddenly dropped everything and prayed.

By the time of Jesus, Jews were divided into three camps in how these prayers were said. There were those Jews who had sincere hearts, used the time of prayer to worship and glorify God. There were others who approached the task indifferently, perfunctorily mumbling their way through the words as quickly as possible. But there was a significant group of overtly religious leaders, who Matthew labels as the scribes and Pharisees, who recited the prayers meticulously, making sure to enunciate every word and syllable perfectly. They went out of their way to be found in public places during the appointed hour of prayer so they could show their overt spirituality. Jesus says, "They are getting what they want out of those prayers. Their reward for praying was for people to think they were pious." That was all they got, nothing from God.

In one of my student churches, I experienced this passage first hand. It wasn't a first century Jew praying one of the 18. It was in a restaurant after worship. I'd been invited to have lunch with a family in my congregation. I didn't know them well. It was a summer student position and I'd only been there a couple of weeks. When we all sat down to eat, the head of the family announced, "Let us bow our heads and pray." Raising his voice as loud as he could so that everyone in the restaurant could hear him, he prayed. "Our gracious and heavenly Father, I thank you for all the blessings you bestow upon us and the opportunity to be in worship today. I pray for those who are outside of your grace that they might find their way to you before it is too late. Bless the food we are about to receive. In the name of Jesus who died for the sins of those who *truly* believe in him and show it. Amen." It was hardly a "go to your room and shut the door kind of prayer." And then he says to me, "That's for those heathens who didn't go to church.

I thought three things. I thought the prayer was for him, not for them. I thought this is exactly what Jesus was getting at when he said, "Beware of practicing your piety in public." And I thought, "I am never going to lunch with these people again."

That experience left such a scar on me that I had a difficult time offering prayer over a meal in public for many years. I didn't want to be perceived as "practicing my piety in public in order to be seen." I got over that when I understood that Jesus words of caution are aimed at our motive, not location. It is about what's going on in our heart rather than our head. We have to be careful that our outward expression is for Him, not for them. Jesus would say that when the motive for any religious activity, whether it be praying, or giving or fasting is to gain recognition rather than getting closer to God, there is no spiritual gain.

We do this and we do this a lot around this time of year. Last night, I stopped by Kroger on the way home from church. One of our members was standing in line, holding a quarter of ice cream. He said "Randy, I'm giving up ice cream for Lent and you know how much I love ice cream. My family says I can't do it. " "Good for you," I said, "I'll keep you in prayers." But right then and there, you see the problem. There is recognition of spiritual practice, positive affirmation, a pat on the back and *atta boy*. Is he giving up ice cream to get closer to God or to get a pat on the back from his pastor and family? No wonder Jesus said, "...when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Matthew 6:17-18)

When we attend worship so that others will think we are spiritual, or when we give because we think we will receive recognition, or when we pray to impress someone else, then Jesus says we've gotten our reward. In other

words, when our inner motivation for a religious activity of any kind is anything other than wanting to be closer to God, there is no spiritual gain even if there is a positive benefit.

Jesus isn't saying that we are to give these practices up. He clearly says, when you pray, when you give, when you fast. The expectation is that we will fast, pray and give; spiritual practices are essentials. But he's saying be clear about your motive because there is always the temptation for religious people to demonstrate their religiosity in order to receive praise, affirmation, and applause. But God cares more about being in real relationship with you than how you appear to others.

If we are honest, what's important is never pure; our motives are always mixed. I stand before you hoping my talk, both the talk of my prayer and this message honors God; but I confess, I care about what you think too, maybe even a little more. Beware of practicing your piety, he says. Yes, Jesus, so we pray, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin." (Psalm 51:1-2)

Jesus is challenging us to develop a spiritual practice from the point of depth, not outward appearance. He wants us to worship, pray, and give not because we must but because we crave to connect with God. He wants us to develop our spiritual practices of discipleship through a pure desire of finding God revealed in our world.

We come on Ash Wednesday knowing that the answers always come hard because our motives get in the way.

Do you know the simple little prayer of Dag Hammarskjöld that great leader of the United Nations and Noble Peace Prize winner? It's clearly one prayed by someone who understands that challenge of the living questions.

- Give me a pure heart that I may see Thee.
- A humble heart that I may hear Thee,
- A heart of love that I may serve Thee,
- A heart of faith that I may abide in Thee.

I think it is possible that this is exactly what Jesus wants us to seek in our spiritual discipline over these next 40 days we call Lent.

¹ <https://fpcwinc.org/blog/2014/03/06/ash-wednesday-sermon-march-5-waiting-and-fasting/>