

Sermon for Ash Wednesday Trinity Episcopal Cathedral

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 / February 14, 2018
By the Very Rev. Timothy Jones

A cartoonist, noticing how Ash Wednesday and
Valentine's Day are falling on the same day,
imagined how greeting card companies might kill
two birds with one stone, with one card.

Like maybe with a saying on a card like,
Roses are red / Violets are blue
Lent is beginning / No chocolates for you

Or one card's greeting, recalling the prayer book's
language for our human condition, might say,

Won't you be my valentine...
you miserable offender?

And another, especially pertinent for Ash
Wednesday:

Remember that you are dust,
but awfully lovable dust.

Someone I knew some years ago was
angry at the church,
at the Episcopal Church to be exact,
and especially at its liturgy,
or at least that's how it got expressed.

With all its beauty and eloquence,
she struggled with anger during a service.

She attended church, regularly, but she often
wrestled with thinking it might all
be hypocritical.

Disconnected from real life.

It turns out that when she was a child
her family would
argue and quarrel all the way
to church on Sunday morning.

I don't just mean irritable snapping at one another,
but *meanness*.

When they hit the parking lot,
the smiles would stretch across their faces
and of course, the quarrels would stop.

They'd walk into church
like the perfect family.

She'd watch her
apparently pious parents
kneel to pray and stand to sing.
And she knew it was pretense and pretend.

Like little children,
God is not fooled by worship
that has no effect on how we actually live our
lives, how we relate to others.

God sees us both
here and at home,
at Sunday school and at work.

Today recognizes that we will never attain
perfection, in this life, at least.

But that nevertheless we should look hard at
places where our faith and our choices
represent a disconnect.

I mean that as much as we can,
we work on living out our faith,
not just displaying it.

Jesus cared a great deal about this integration of
beliefs and daily choices.

Words and deeds.
Convictions and ethics.

There's something not only challenging here in
his strong words in today's Gospel,
but also freeing.

Freeing because what he says helps us when we
feel pressure to have smiling, happy children and
project an image that says we are greeting each
moment of marriage and parenting
or single life with zest.

My friend says when we come together at church
and talk about our goings-on
we chat about the highlights and keep quiet about
the low-lights:
we hide the hard things that happen to us.

We put a smiling veneer over everything,
even when we've just had a miserable week.

Jesus knew that our drive to be liked and loved
and admired leads us to hide our true selves,
leads us to present to others a touched-up picture.

We sometimes pretend.

Maybe here in church we feel pressure to
do it all the more.

But an insistence on revealing the highlights only,
this compulsion to present a polite and happy face
is isolating. Discouraging.

Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount come as
a refreshing possibility.

Put down the posturing, the preening, the trying
always to look good, he says.

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in
order to be seen by them," he says.

When it comes to your gifts to the church or what
you give to the poor, don't do it for show.

"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a
trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the
synagogues and in the streets,
so that they may be praised by others.

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the
hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the
synagogues and at the street corners, so that they
may be seen by others."

He's saying that showiness is not the point.

It's not the point of life.

Not the point of our practice of the faith.

He's saying, Be a person whose most concerned
about what God thinks,

not what others think.

Because look at what Jesus goes on to say.

He talks about hypocrites.

A hypocrite is not someone who tries and fails.

A hypocrite is *not* someone who's imperfect.

A hypocrite is a person who wears a mask
because of trying to be something he or she is not.

So " whenever you fast," he says, "do not look
dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their
faces so as to show others that they are fasting,"
even if their hearts aren't right.

How can we cultivate here in this place an
atmosphere where we surrender
a need to impress?

Where we give up always putting on a game face,
or a strike a prim, holy gaze?

The "how" has something to do with heeding his
challenge here.

But also with a promise.

Jesus' words are ultimately freeing because this
day also reminds us to reconnect
with our common need for grace.

If we are all saved by God's mercy and
forgiveness, not our accomplishments,
not our artful managing of how we look,
then we can stop worrying so much.

Knowing of his free gift of mercy in Christ,
We can stop our incessant need to impress others.

We ask God in penitence for his mercy.
We drop our silly need to impress God,
as if we could anyway.

We are dust, after all, as the liturgy reminds us,
But lovable dust.

That truth, that conviction means we can stop
spending time effort in proving and preening.

And we get on with the hard and important work
of humbly, penitently, contentedly loving God.

For today can free us instead to concentrate on
being God's child, doing God's work,
living for him, not for what others might think.