

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

The Good News of the Bad News

Ash Wednesday

February 14, 2018

The Rev. Dr. Mario Gonzalez del Solar

St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Richmond VA

Isaiah 58:1-12 (NRSV)

Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.² Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.³ “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice? ”Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers.⁴ Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.⁵ Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? ⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.⁹ Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,¹⁰ if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.¹¹ The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.¹² Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10 (NRSV)

So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

¹ As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ² For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! ³ We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴ but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷ truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸ in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹ as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 (NRSV)

[Jesus said,] “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

² “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. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵ “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. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁶ “And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Today is both Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day. If you've mistakenly come here this morning for Valentine's Day, I'd recommend you go over to Westbury Pharmacy and buy a card there. They also open at 7am.

Lent begins today. In a few minutes we'll put ashes on our foreheads. The words I'll say—"remember that you are dust, and that to dust you shall return," are from Genesis 3:19. They are part of God's sentence on Adam and all his descendants for their sin. By doing this, we remind ourselves that we're mortal—that is, that we all die. As I like to say, life is one of those offers that is good "for a limited time only." The rest of Scripture bears out this reality. For example, **"The person who sins shall die."** (Ezekiel 18:20) **"The wages of sin is death."** (Romans 6:23) Lent reminds us of this fact. For this reason, there are people who really don't care for Lent because it's bad news.

But our death from sin is not God's ultimate plan for human beings. It's not God's best for us. That's why the bad news of Ash Wednesday is really good news. Our readings today will help me explain. We all know that Lent is the lead-up to Easter. Easter, of course, is the celebration of Jesus' glorious resurrection to eternal life after having been cruelly crucified for our sins. In other words, Lent exposes the disease for which Easter is the cure. There are three warnings in our Scripture readings that remind us of our need for God's cure in Christ. We do well to remember that all three of our readings are addressed to religious people—people like us.

In our first reading from Isaiah 58, God admonishes his people for fasting and praying in hopes that God will be attracted to them. He repeats what they've been saying. They've been asking, **"Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"** And then he tells them why: **"Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers.⁴ Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high."** No, says the Lord. **"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, 'Here I am.'"**

Lent is a religious observance, and fasting is part of it. But the Lord is saying that fasting without changing our behavior and attitudes isn't pleasing to him. He wants us to fast as **he** has chosen: to align our life with his life in his care for the poor and his zeal for justice. So the Lord here warns us against empty religious observance.

Paul gives us God's second warning in our reading from 2 Corinthians. Ironically, it's a warning about God's grace. God's grace is his love and favor towards us that we haven't earned because we cannot earn it. In this passage is a verse that's one of the towering revelations of God's love and mercy to undeserving sinners: 2 Corinthians 5:21: **"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."** **"For our sake."** Can you fathom the greatness of this gift? Jesus, the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, the living Word of the holy and righteous Father, became sin itself. In his death on the cross, Jesus became the target of all God's righteous wrath unleashed against sinners. **"For our sake."**

This is the grace of God. Paul counsels us not to receive it in vain. There are two ways we religious people might be in danger of doing that. First, we might slip into thinking that our religious practice will make us worthy of God's grace. It won't, because we're not. And second, we might presume upon it. We might take it for granted. Instead, Paul counsels us to go out of our comfort zones to become more and more like Christ by taking up our cross as he did. Warning 2: don't receive God's grace in vain.

Warning 3 comes from Jesus himself. It ties in with warning 1 against empty religious observance, but it's also a warning against settling for second best. Jesus uses the examples of giving to the poor, praying and fasting. All were accepted religious practices among the Jewish people in his day. But Jesus warns us, **"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven."** As Jesus also said, **"seek, and ye shall find."** If all we're seeking is the praise and attention of other people, then that's all we're going to get. If all you're looking for is to have others think well of you, that's what you'll find. That's as good as it gets for us. But if we're seeking God as we give, as we pray, and as we fast, we will find him. He is our treasure. He is the supreme value in the universe. **"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."** The praise of others is second best. God wants us to seek him as our treasure.

These warnings against empty religious observance and receiving God's grace in vain, and settling for second best wouldn't be necessary if we weren't sinners in need of Jesus Christ. That's the bad news. But it's good news because they lead us more and more to Jesus Christ and his victory over sin and death as we move through Lent towards Easter.