

**OPENING:**

The story goes that many years ago a pastor attempted to form a prayer group in his congregation.

A parishioner, perhaps thinking about today's passage, told the pastor she refused.... because Jesus said that, instead, she should go into her closet and pray privately before the Lord.

The pastor asked how often she did so.

The parishioner responded, "That is not the point! The point is that if I did pray, I should do it all by myself."<sup>1</sup>

Here then is the first irony of Ash Wednesday—we hear about how we should not draw attention to our fasts and we should pray in private.

But then we participate in a communal liturgy that features a public display of our mortality and our sinfulness.

**SECOND IRONY:**

The second irony of Ash Wednesday follows right after the first.

Notice what happens after we disfigure our countenances, we confess our sins, and we admit that we have fallen short in God's eyes, what do we do next?

Many of us, myself included, then engage in a discipline throughout the Lenten season where we try to prove that indeed we *can* do it, that we *do* have sufficient willpower to escape our fallen nature.

So, on the one hand, Ash Wednesday is when we admit to God, for a moment, that we are nothing without God.

On the other hand, our Lenten disciplines are, at least in part, all about trying to prove that maybe, just maybe, we can show God, and ourselves and each other, otherwise.

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<sup>1</sup> William Brosend, "Theological Perspective (Matthew 6.1-6)." 2013. *Feasting on the Gospels- Matthew* (Volume 1) Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox: 118.

### **THIRD IRONY:**

A final irony of Ash Wednesday is that we start our Lenten Journeys at the end. We begin these long 40 days, this journey through the wilderness, at the end, with a reminder of our own deaths.

That means that Ash Wednesday is like watching a movie where the opening scene is the funeral of the main character, which is you and me, and then we work our way back, (or is it forward?) from there.

### **IRONY:**

Irony is the gap between perception and reality. The distance between those two things can cause us to look deeper, it can cause us to laugh, and it can cause us to wonder what is going on.

God uses irony all the time, to be sure, in his creation.

Just look at how he used a teenage mother,

her apolitical backwoods carpenter son,

and the latter's chief persecutor to rearrange the entire world.

So let's take a look at each of these ironies, these curious gaps between reality and perception, and try to see what God is up to in each, here on this Ash Wednesday.

### **PUBLIC vs. PRIVATE:**

1<sup>st</sup>, in our Gospel lesson, to repeat, Jesus says "beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them."

But in just the chapter prior, Jesus had said: "Don't hide your light under bushel... Let your light shine before others."<sup>2</sup>

So, which one is it?

Jesus is trying to say something about intention, something about the purpose and attitude of what we do.

So, I think that the Church is trying to saying, with this, service that, in order to shine like a light, we must engage in some reckoning about who we really are.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 6.1; Matthew 5.14-15.

Ash Wednesday enables us to come out of the shadows and show ourselves to be the broken, not entirely whole, not worthy sinners and saints that we truly are.

Here is how one theologian put it:

“The Ash Wednesday liturgy stage-manages us into public exposure: (proclaiming) we are not what we seem. Hearing and deliberately disobeying the gospel by receiving ashes is a way of coming out of the closet to ourselves and to others as dust-to-dust-returning, as people who are not pure in heart, who do not love God with all we have, who still equivocate between merely human aspirations and kingdom goals. The purpose of Lent is to let that public confession and outward humiliation work from the outside in, toward genuine repentance that receives the forgiveness of sins.”<sup>3</sup>

### **GRACE vs WORKS:**

Our second irony comes with what happens next, the idea that today, as we go into full grovel mode, we simultaneously keep our fingers crossed behind our back, as if to say, maybe just maybe, I can pull myself out of this by giving up this or taking on that, during this Lenten Season.

That’s a deep, deep irony of the human condition and our relationship with our Creator that I can only attempt to understand and comment on.

How are we but dust, but also called to be Christ’s hands and feet in this world?

One way of looking at this, according to Martin Smith, is that in this season, we are paradoxically urged to “surrender”—not to strive, not to achieve, or overcome ourselves—we are to “surrender” to a discipline in Lent- be it public or private. <sup>4</sup>

Or, put in a slightly different way, Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that following Jesus involves a kind of “forgetfulness” where that effort allows us to try to lose our overpowering sense of self.<sup>5</sup>

These are ironic views of Lenten disciplines, almost detached and counter-intuitive ones. But they make sense when you are following someone whose view of discipleship involves losing your life, so you gain it, whose demand to take up the cross and die, will lead to everlasting life.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Marilyn McCord Adams. “Theological Perspective (Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21).” 2013. *Feasting on the Word- Year B* (Volume 2). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, Martin L. 1991. *A Season for the Spirit: Readings for the Days of Lent*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley. 4-6.

<sup>5</sup> Hauerwas, Stanley. 2015. *Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 74.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 10.39.

## **CHRONOS vs. KAIROS**

This hints at our 3<sup>rd</sup> and final irony, one that I think God especially enjoys and revels in. Ash Wednesday begins at the end, which is something that God does all the time.

Think of how Matthew's Gospel ends.

The resurrected Jesus tells the disciples "Go to Galilee."<sup>7</sup>

The Gospel is at its end, and Jesus says: "Actually... it's just begun."

Go back to where it all started and begin the journey again.

Think also of where the Bible starts: "In the beginning....."<sup>8</sup>

The Bible starts with Eden, this vision of Heaven, the end, at the very beginning.

## **CONCLUSION**

This Lenten Season, I invite you to revel and struggle and laugh in these ironies.

We will journey, in private and in public, in this season of Penitence, prayer and fasting.

We will travel, with great effort and, thankfully, with God's grace, during these 40 days wandering in the Wilderness.

We will all start in different places and travel on different roads, but we will end up in the same place, at the Tomb, at the Easter Grave, which looks an awful lot like the end, but is actually the beginning.<sup>9</sup>

**AMEN.**

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 28.7, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 1.1

<sup>9</sup> Smith, Martin L. 1991. *A Season for the Spirit: Readings for the Days of Lent*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley. 4-6.