

**The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber**

**Ash Wednesday**

**2.18.26**

Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them. It always seems a little strange that these are the instructions we hear from Jesus on a day when we will walk around in public with a black mark on our foreheads. Does it feel like we are doing the exact thing Jesus is counseling against in this reading?

Well, maybe. In today's world of less and less church involvement, we may not get a lot of praise for showing our religious observance. We're probably just as likely to provoke confused stares or even anger from folks with negative associations to organized religion. But still, what is Jesus saying here, and what does it mean for our Ash Wednesday tradition?

I heard a story recently that made me think a little differently about Jesus' message in this Gospel. A few of us from St Martin's attended an educational forum held by Need-in-Deed, an organization that trains and mentors teachers to do service based learning in Philadelphia public schools. Need-in-Deed was founded by three St Martin's women over 40 years ago, and it has grown beautifully since then while staying true to its core mission.

The panel included a Need-in-Deed teacher who talked about what she has learned about how to be an effective teacher, as a white woman serving mostly Black students. She spoke about needing to be vulnerable, to learn from her students and others, to seek out people who would challenge her.

And she told a story, about earlier in her teaching career, when she felt a need to make her classroom library more relevant and affirming of her students' culture and social location. She tentatively went to another teacher, a Black woman who had been teaching for some time, and with a lot of hemming and hawing and stumbling for words, tried to ask how she should go about finding other, more diverse, books. The more experienced teacher cut in at some point. I hear a lot of white guilt here, she said. Why don't you just come look at my classroom library? You can see what I have and I'll help you get set up. Oh yeah, the younger teacher realized. That wasn't so hard!

It can be like this for us, for our daily lives and our prayer life. We want to pray more, but we don't know how, and it feels like we shouldn't have to ask about it. We want to make the world better, but

we have so much guilt and anxiety and baggage about what to do and how to do it and also so much fear about asking.

For sure, sometimes we can make an unnecessary show of our prayer, our good deeds, our concern about issues. We have new ways of doing our virtue signaling than they had in Jesus' time, thanks to social media. But sometimes I think, the problem is less about bragging, that we junk up our intentions in other ways.

And I think that's Jesus' point. Don't be so extra, he is saying. God doesn't need your fawning for attention, and also, God doesn't need your white guilt, your embarrassment about asking for help, your frenzied overwhelm about the world's problems, all of which distract from the real thing. Jesus is saying, don't make such a fuss about it. Just pray. Just give. Just fast. Do the things that will draw you closer to God. Do the things that will make the world better. Don't act ridiculous, don't waste your energy and time worrying if it's perfect, don't be afraid to ask for help.

Another panelist at the Need-in-Deed forum that same night, a principal at a school in South Philly, showed how it can look when we just quietly act. This principal mentioned, almost as an aside, that she has been having weekly pizza lunches with a group of five students whose parents are currently being held in immigrant detention. The students can bring a friend, and so this small group is talking about their experience and supporting each other over a meal in the middle of their otherwise busy school week. The principal is making a space, doing what she can to ease what must be an incredible trauma for these kids. With no trumpet and no need to be an expert or be able to solve everything before acting.

The principal is acting quietly, but it was also good that she brought it up. Because after the panel, several people came up and asked, how can we help you with that? How can we support your students and their families? There is a range between drawing too much attention and being maybe too lowkey.

And this brings me back to the dark blotches on our foreheads. The ashes are not there to draw attention to our piety, our holiness. They are a reminder, a signal of accountability, to us. A reminder that it is Lent, that we may want to slow down a bit, we may want to do think about God a bit more. The sentence we hear, Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return, tells us we can't put off God forever, we have limited days and seasons and years to work on our relationship with God.

The sentence we hear, Remember that you are dust, reminds us of our creation story, that we humans were created by God, formed from the dust of the earth, made with love by God's own hands. St Martin's, Lent is a time to be vulnerable, to do something that is challenging for you, to ask questions if you don't know. It is a time to just try a practice or action that could make you or the world a little better. It is a time to not worry if you look a little foolish walking around with a smudge on your forehead. People may get the wrong impression about you, but so what? And if someone does ask you about your faith because it is so visible today, to not worry that you don't have all the answers. Let them see a fellow seeker, a fellow struggler, someone else just trying to build up a little heaven, right here. Amen.