

Jesus is really getting into the good parts of the Sermon on the Mount, by chapter 6 in Matthew. He's been talking about the beatitudes. He then talked about the Jewish Law and how we are not to erase a mark or letter of the Law. And then he talked about not committing murder or lust or divorce in certain circumstances and letting our yesses be yes and no's be no. And right before this passage, Jesus summarized the Law of Moses by reminding us that we are called to turn the other cheek and love our enemies. Jesus is really going strong by this point. He's in his stride now. I wonder what the crowd of disciples is thinking now when Jesus starts teaching them about public displays of piety. Were they really getting into the sermon, or were they murmuring to themselves, "what's this guy's deal?" We don't know how they responded, though we know elsewhere in Scriptures that whenever Jesus preaches, he draws quite the crowd. So, I have to think that many of them were really digging what he was preaching.

This passage from Matthew is the traditional passage we read on Ash Wednesday. Through the years, I have heard some people use this passage as Biblical proof for why we shouldn't have an Ash Wednesday service, or at least, why we shouldn't put ashes on our foreheads. Aren't we putting our faith on display, they ask? Didn't you just read that we aren't supposed to let people know when we are praying or fasting? And these are legitimate questions that I have wrestled with myself. My younger self agreed with them. But the older I've gotten, the more time I've thought about it, I've really come to believe that neither our Ash Wednesday service nor our practice of putting ashes on our foreheads conflict with what Jesus is saying here. What Jesus is preaching here is about putting our faith on display. Jesus teaches us that where our heart is, there is our treasure. So in terms of Ash Wednesday, I have to ask: Do we worship on Ash Wednesday and put ashes on our forehead because we want to put our faith on display so that everyone will know that we are Christians and applaud us for our piety? While each one of us will have to answer that question on their own, I do not believe that what we are doing here tonight is putting our faith on display for others. It's no different than when we worship together or when we pray for a friend who is going through a tough time. We don't do these things because we want praise and adoration. We do it to give glory to God.

Lent is supposed to be a time of self-examination and repentance. We should be spending time this season asking ourselves: Where are the places in our lives where we need more of God and less of our own egos? And, where are the places in our communities where we need more of God and less of our own egos? How about in our churches? We are called during the season of Lent to repent for all the ways that we have sinned as individuals and as a community. Putting ashes on oneself is an ancient act of contrition. It reminds us that we are mortal and that we must rely upon God and not ourselves.

Lent is also a time when we are called to deny ourselves and draw ourselves closer to God. For many Christians, Lent is a time when we give up something, or fast, in the hopes of drawing close to God. Our Catholic siblings give up eating meat on certain days. Some people give up eating chocolate or caffeine or some other vice that they really love. I love the idea of fasting in a healthy and intentional way. As we begin Lent tonight and you are contemplating fasting during Lent, I would ask you: What do you hope will happen by giving up something during Lent? Is the deprivation of something meant to draw you closer to God and away from that thing? For instance, is giving up caffeine for Lent mean that you focus more of your time and energy on God and relying less on soda and/or coffee? It's my hope that you take some time during the next 6 weeks of Lent to draw closer to God and away from the stuff that draws our attention elsewhere. Where our heart is, there is our treasure.

I'm excited about Lent. This Lenten season, it's my goal to read the Bible more, to spend more time in prayer, and to try and let go of my dependence on my phone. That's going to be tough. I am one of those people who grabs their phone when they're bored. I'm going to need to put a rubber band around my wrist or something to remind me every time I am tempted to grab my phone when I'm bored. It is my hope that, by the time Easter comes, when I'm bored, I will not turn my attention to my phone. Take some time this evening and figure out how you want to draw closer to God. Set a goal for yourself. Maybe it's spending more time with God in prayer. Set aside some time every day during the day when you can offer your best self to God in prayer. Maybe your goal is to spend more time reading the Bible by setting aside some time every day when you're ready to read and listen to God. Maybe you're like me and you want to spend some time this Lenten season trying to become less dependent on something and more dependent

upon God. Whatever your goal is for Lent, I encourage you to spend time over these next 6 weeks working on drawing closer to God, not because your pastor said so or because you think everyone else is doing it or because you think you have to do it. Do it because you want to grow closer to God. Where your heart is, there is your treasure. Amen and Amen.