**February 18, 2015 – Ash Wednesday**

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“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.” Those are Jesus own words to us. And yet, here we are, on this, one of the most holy days of our Church year, doing just that. We’ll leave here and go out into the world with a schmutz of ash on our foreheads, and everyone we meet will know that we’ve just been to church. So what does Jesus mean?

Well, obviously, he means to not call attention to it. To say, “Hey! I’ve just been to church and have the ashes to prove how pious I am!” would be right out. But none of us are planning on doing that, are we? If you are, I don’t want to know about it!

So why the ashes? Why mark ourselves at all?

Well, first there is repentance. The tradition of putting ashes on the head to show remorse and grief for our sins goes back thousands of years in our shared Jewish history. It showed a humble acceptance of our sinful natures, and a resolve to turn our lives around.

And it still shows that today. Lent is a time for reflection and repentance, and the ashes are a real, tangible reminder of that. They are for us to see when we look in the mirror, not for others to see and recognize how humble we are. Lent is a time for looking inward at our lives and for asking God to show us ways in which we can do and be better.

Which brings us to another reason for the ashes. Jesus said not to flaunt our piety, but he didn’t say not to practice it. WHENEVER you give alms, WHENEVER you pray, and WHENEVER you fast. Not IF, WHEN. And the ashes are our reminder, on this day, in every day in Lent, and in every day of our lives, to live our faith on the outside as well as the inside. To live it, not to flaunt it.

Especially giving alms. Giving alms is a fancy way of saying, “take care of the poor among us.” I sometimes thing our fancy church language does us a disservice. People hear the phrase “giving alms” and think, “I have no idea what that means, really, to me personally.” When in fact, it’s one of the most important – maybe THE most important of the three things Jesus tells us to do.

In our passage from Isaiah today we heard:

*God says, 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?*

THIS is the kind of flaunting that God approves of – the open-handed, freely given, help for the poor and victims of injustice. Through the ashes, and through Lent, God is calling us to a holy humility that involves seeing past our own lives and into the lives of those less fortunate than we are.

And then, to drive the point home that we should be giving, not hoarding, at the end of our Gospel today Jesus tells us

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

These ashes, the ashes that tell us that we are dust and to dust we shall return, remind us not just of our own mortality, though they do that. They remind us that everything we own, everything we are, we have and are through God’s grace and generosity. They remind us that we are being called to fast and pray, to repent and turn our lives around where they need turning, and especially to give.

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” There your heart WILL be also. It’s cause and effect. Give your treasure away to those who are in need, and that’s where your heart will be. Keep it in banks or in CDs or under your mattress, then THAT’S where your heart will be. And in that case, the ashes today, all of Lent, and in fact, the Cross and Resurrection, are just meaningless symbols.

Don’t let Jesus’ sacrifice be meaningless to you. Wear the ashes today as a sign that you are ready to follow him – follow him into the desert, follow him up the side of Golgoltha with the weight of the Cross on your back, and ultimately follow him to the glory of the kingdom of God.

The ashes are a sign that you are dust and to dust you’ll return, but they are also a sign that you are marked as God’s own forever.

May you have a blessed Lent.

Amen.