March 5, 2014 – Ash Wednesday

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 “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.””

It’s no accident that we read this Gospel passage every year at the beginning of Lent.Lent is when you give something you like up, right? Then post it on Facebook? Unless, of course, you’ve given up Facebook for Lent. Then Twitter will have to do.

Then there’s the more recent idea of taking on an extra discipline or practice for Lent. And then posting it on Facebook. When I was a kid, and we didn’t have such newfangled things like Facebook or Twitter (computers were Univac and Control Data back then, and took up whole rooms). So we had to make sure we told everyone what we were giving up in person. It became quite a contest. Chocolate was usually the front runner. One year I gave up all snacks except gum. Don’t ask me why – I guess I figured I couldn’t live without gum for some reason. Now, with a mouth full of crowns, gum would be easy to give up!

It wasn’t that we were trying to be ostentatious back then, just like I don’t think that ALL people who post their Lenten discipline on Facebook are necessarily TRYING to show off. But, on the other hand, why else would you do it? I guess once you become “religious” it’s in bad taste to flaunt new cars and fancy vacations, so we go in another direction. Religious austerity becomes a new kind of wealth.

So that’s a lot of what Jesus is getting at here. If you decide to follow some religious practice for Lent, don’t brag about it. Simple enough.

Except Lent didn’t exist in Jesus’ day, so he must have been talking about something else, too.

Obviously, he’s warning his followers to avoid hypocrisy in their daily religious practice. But let’s turn it around for a minute. Jesus is telling his disciples to not be ostentatious in their devotions, but he’s NOT telling them not to do them.

WHENEVER you give alms, WHENEVER you pray, and WHENEVER you fast. Not IF, WHEN. Praying, fasting, and almsgiving – these were givens in first century devout Judaism, and they are givens in 21st century devout Christianity. These three activities are expected, not hoped for. They are the very least we can do. And we shouldn’t necessarily expect rewards for doing our basic duty without complaint or fanfare.

But why these three? Part of it is tradition, of course. Praying, fasting, and almsgiving (which is basically taking care of the poor in your community) are important themes running all throughout the Old Testament and the New.

Almsgiving, which is basically taking care of the poor in our communities, is not the same as pledging or even tithing, which should be given in gratitude for all that God has given us. It’s not used to maintain buildings or to keep the heat on – that’s basic good stewardship. Almsgiving is God’s command to help each other. Period. We’re not on this earth alone, and God wants us to live together, and support each other, in community. As a side note, traditionally, in the Church, part or all of the loose offering has been used for the sole purpose of helping the poor.

Praying is kind of an obvious religious discipline, but it’s amazing how many people don’t pray very often. Even clergy – or maybe especially clergy, who have a lot of other things on their plates. But praying should be our first consideration.

Pray without ceasing, Paul tells us in First Thessalonians. I’m sure he didn’t mean get down on your knees and never get up again, but rather, organize your heart and soul and mind around constant communication with God. Ask God for things, certainly, but also complain about things, rave about things, laugh about things, cry about things, or simply BE in God’s presence. Prayer keeps the door open between us and God, and a big part of it is actually stopping to listen to what God has to say. We’ll do some of that later in this service, but it’s something that should make up a big part of our prayer life.

And finally, fasting. Fasting is not a discipline that we’re very familiar with in our western society, unless it’s a juice fast or a cleansing fast for some supposed health reason. But fasting is not meant for losing weight. It’s meant to underscore our dependence on God for all our needs. Most of us are rarely hungry, though sadly, there is far more hunger and starvation in the world and even in South Dakota than I would like. “Far more,” being “ANY.”

But few of us here will experience real hunger because of our circumstances, so that’s where fasting comes in. It lets us know, through that most noisy character, our stomach, how dependent upon God we really are. And this acknowledgement of our dependence in a physical way is another way of opening the door to God.

So ultimately, almsgiving, praying, and fasting, are not about us. That is what Jesus is getting at. They are all about God – God’s call to us, God’s desire to be in communion with us, and God’s plan to take care of us. As you move forward into Holy Lent, keep these three things in mind. Give what you can, pray without ceasing, and be ever mindful and thankful for God’s generous presence in our lives. These are our treasures in heaven, and where our treasures are, there will our hearts be also.

Amen.