

“The Secret Way to a Joyful Life”**Matthew 6:1-18****Rev. Andrew Connors****3rd Sunday in Lent****March 13, 2023**

Usually this text is read on Ash Wednesday which I always find incredibly confusing. I mean the text says that hypocrites mark their faces to show how pious they are which is exactly what we proceed to do in that same service - marking our foreheads to kick start our Lenten piety. “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them,” Jesus says. “Do not sound the trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do so they may be praised by others.” “Do not be like the hypocrites who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others.” “Do not look dismal when you fast like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting.”

Jesus wants us to practice our piety in secret which is confusing on more than just Ash Wednesday. Not so much on the fasting since Presbyterians don't really fast - we just go on diets. But today, like every Sunday, we are praying in public with our speaking and our singing. A little while later we'll be passing the offering plate and hoping that we are all generous in public, too.

Jesus wants us to practice our piety in secret because, he says, doing religious stuff in public is the quick route to becoming a hypocrite. Saying one thing while doing another. Using our religion to score status points instead of keeping the focus on faithfulness to God. This is probably the biggest reason that people give to me for why they are not religious. Sure I run across the resolute atheist from time to time who has decided that God is just a human construction. But more often than not I experience people who've been turned off by their experience of other Christians. With stories of judgments here or bad behavior there.

If doing religious stuff in public is an easy way to slide toward hypocrisy, then one way of avoiding becoming a hypocrite is not to do religious stuff in public at all. Practice your faith at home, away from other people which seems like what Jesus is prescribing, although I'm not sure refraining from public religiosity in our secular culture is necessarily the way toward faithfulness either. I once heard about a person who once tried to form a prayer group in a congregation. One parishioner declined, saying that “she agreed with Jesus that she should go into her closet and pray.” When the organizer of the prayer group inquired as to how often she actually prayed in her closet, she snapped, “That's not the point! The point is that if I did pray, I should do it all by

myself.”¹ Jesus’ goal seems to be faithfulness, nurtured by authentic prayer, generosity, and discipline.

A regular time of fasting to nurture our hunger for a better world and connect us to those who are deprived in some way from it; A regular time of prayer to deepen our trust and reliance on God and shape our own vision and desires in the world. Generosity that is practiced every single day, reminding us that meritocracy isn’t possible when it comes to life and creation. We came into this world as gifts and everything that comes under our stewardship including our own lives are to be used accordingly. The purpose of this fasting, prayer, and generosity isn’t to earn anything. It’s the pathway to becoming alive. These spiritual disciplines are best cultivated in private because, as Brian McClaren says, “if we make our lives a show staged for others to avoid their criticism or gain their praise, we won’t experience the reward of true aliveness. It’s only in secret in the presence of God alone, that we begin the journey toward aliveness.”² (138).

For most of the circles that most of us run in today, prayer and fasting in public don’t gain us any status or recognition. But public generosity still matches up from Jesus’ time to ours. I’m sure some of us have been motivated to give at the “X amount of dollars and above” level to get our name in the list of public donors. Or volunteered to host your kid’s class party to get the pat on the back. What Jesus is getting after here isn’t to have people volunteering less to host the class party or give to their alma mater. What he’s focusing on is each of us facing our inner motivations. Recognizing how often we are motivated by appearance or status not so that we can be shamed by that information, but so, over time, we can be freed from it.

You get a front row seat every week in watching me deal with this conundrum in the giving of the sermon. Every week one of your pastors, usually me, is charged with going to our sacred texts, reading, interpreting, reflecting and putting together a reflection that somehow connects with you the listener and we the congregation. I desire to create something that inspires, sometimes agitates in a productive way, and deepens our connection to God and to each other. But it’s easy for different motivations to creep in. To be praised. To avoid criticism. To be applauded. There’s nothing wrong with being praised, and it’s certainly nice when something lands so well that there’s no need for criticism. It’s wonderful when a preacher gives something so heartfelt and vulnerable that it’s applauded. It’s not a bad thing to feel good doing what you love. It’s just that if my motivation shifts from creating something with integrity, to creating something to generate praise for myself, I haven’t been freed from the games of the world, I’m still playing them.

Jerzy Grotowski, the great Polish theater actor wrote about this struggle is his admonitions and guidance to other actors. If you are driven by the desire to be

¹ William F. Brosend, II, “Theological Perspective” in *Feasting on the Word*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2013, p. 118.

² Brian McClaren, *We Make This Road By Walking*, (New York: Jericho Books), 2014, p. 138.

acclaimed, to win applause and words of esteem, he said, you will make it impossible to create something great. “Great works are always sources of conflict,” he wrote. “True artists do not have an easy life and are not, to begin with, acclaimed and carried shoulder high. At the start and for a long time, there is a hard struggle. The artist speaks the truth. This truth is nearly always different from the popular conception of truth. The public does not like to be taxed by problems. It is much easier for the spectator to find in the play what he already knows. So, there is a conflict.”

“But afterwards, step by step, the same public begins to realize that it is these same artists, these peculiar artists, whom they cannot forget. Then there is a moment when you could be said to have achieved glory. And you have earned the right to speak the truths which are not popular ones. At that moment there are two possibilities. Either you have found that this social position is very important to you and this means you have blocked all possible further development. You are already frightened of losing your position so you only say the same things the others say. Or you still feel free as an artist. You are not yet orientated towards the public. You always seek the truth, even that which is hidden deepest. Then you will go further and will remain a great [person].³

This is the freedom that Jesus is coaching us into and it’s not a freedom only for the sake of individual enrichment. It’s the kind of freedom that can change the world. Freed from the world’s games and pressures, God’s desires can become our own. And when God’s desires become our own, a generous, joyous, giving life isn’t something that you have to chase after. It’s one you can relinquish yourself into, one you can fall into with less anxiety, fear and dread.

The way we do that, according to Brian McClaren is “pull[ing] away from the world’s games and pressures” to do some spiritual work in secret. You don’t need a vast program or any talent.⁴ Jesus tells you three things to do. Give anonymously and talk to God about it. I mean wake up everyday and orient yourself to imagine that you are going to actively seek out ways to be generous that day. Maybe you’re going to give that person who wants to cut you off on the highway a blessing instead of a four-letter word. Maybe you’re going to stop and listen to a person on a corner asking for money - maybe you offer them some change or maybe you offer to listen and pray instead. Maybe you’re going to try a different approach to that person that you always seem in conflict with at work. Ask them how their family is doing and really listen. Maybe you’re going to look at your personal budget this month and see how you might carve out more for a nonprofit that needs it. No one is going to see that generosity except for God and you so take note of how it affects you.

Second, you’re going to pray by yourself without the assistance of the liturgy or a pastor. Don’t know how to pray? No problem. Jesus tells you - the Lord’s prayer. Maybe each day you focus on a phrase instead of the whole thing. Your kingdom come.

³ Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, (New York: Routledge), 2002 (originally published 1968), 241-242.

⁴ McClaren, p. 139.

Imagine what God's reign among us looks like. Imagine what it looks like for God's peace and justice to come in our city where we just lost a 15 year-old Izaiah to a gun violence at school. Imagine what that looks like in a country where we have a hard time solving problems together. Notice how a hungering for that realm of God's justice changes you. Perhaps you notice how reluctant you are to allow yourself to hunger for it. To allow yourself to imagine it.

Third, you're going to fast in whatever way you can that protects your health. Maybe you skip breakfast one morning intentionally. You're going to walk around with the words "give us this day our daily bread" and notice your hunger. What does it feel like to hunger after bread? What does it feel like to hunger after God? What does it feel like to hunger after God's justice in the world?

You're going to do these things in secret and if you're desperate to speak to someone about your experience, then fine, but don't do these things so that you can speak to someone about your experience. Because God isn't trying to motivate you with guilt or admiration. God is trying to free you from those worldly games. God isn't even trying to make you more religious. God is inviting you into the freedom of a generous life oriented toward all the things that bring us true joy, so that we together can become a little more like the beloved community that God wants for all of us.