

## When You Pray

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The First Sunday in Lent  
March 10, 2019

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites. . . .” – Matthew 6:5a

Lent began this past Wednesday, and to open that season, we held what turned out to be a very intimate Ash Wednesday service here at Faith. The choir, which numbered ten, outnumbered the congregation, which numbered nine, including a first-time guest. The weather played its part in the small turnout, of course, as did the darkness. We don't have many evening services here at Faith, in part because the liturgical calendar doesn't call for many evening services and in part because an increasing number of us don't drive after dark.

So next year, we may try something different and hold our Ash Wednesday service in the middle of the day, when we can count on sunlight even if we can't count on fair weather. We realize, of course, that working folks may not be able to get to a service here at Faith in the middle of the day, so we'll encourage them to look for a service closer to where they work.

One of the advantages of an evening Ash Wednesday service is that it allows us to take Jesus more or less at his word as it's found in this morning's gospel reading, which is also read at every Ash Wednesday service: “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” (v. 1).

From the time that we are marked with ashes in the Ash Wednesday service until we return to our homes is usually a matter of minutes, and that time is shrouded in darkness. Unless you told them you were coming to church, most of your family and friends, and certainly very few of your acquaintances, would know that you had received the traditional sign of mourning, mortality, and penitence.

And that's the way we Protestants of northwestern European ancestry prefer it: the ashes are for us and for God, not to be seen by others. We don't parade our piety around in the streets, or in our places of labor and leisure. We don't go to church so that others will see that we've gone to church. We come to church, on Ash Wednesday and every other day, as an expression of our gratitude to God for the blessings of this life, to receive the comforts of religion that can help us grow in that sense of gratitude, and to renew our hope in the life to come.

I hear Jesus' words about practicing one's piety before others every time I say grace in a restaurant, which is pretty much all the time, whether I'm eating alone or with others. “Beware of practicing your piety before others,” I hear in my head, and I go ahead and bow it and say my prayer because I'm not praying to be seen by others; I'm praying for the same reason that an ancient Israelite should pray, as Jill read for us in the first lesson in Deuteronomy: I'm praying out of gratitude not only for the blessing on the plate in front of me, or the blessing on the chair across from me, but for every blessing that has made my life what it is, what it continues to be, and what I hope it will become, in this life and beyond.

Some of you may wonder, from time to time, why we do what we do in church. Why, for example, does the head usher bring up the morning offering to the liturgist, who places it on the altar

or on the credence table while we sing the Doxology or some other offertory response? There are both liturgical and practical reasons for this.

The liturgical reason is found in that lesson from Deuteronomy. When an Israelite farmer – and almost all Israelites were farmers in those days – got the first crops of the season from his fields, he was obligated to take some of those first fruits and bring them to the temple or local shrine and offer them as a sign of gratitude to the one who had provided them. All farmers know that no matter how hard you work or how carefully you plan, a successful crop ultimately depends on powers beyond our control. We who aren't farmers have largely forgotten that reality. We take it for granted that the supermarket will be open and the shelves will be stocked thanks, not to God, but to agribusiness. A farmer knows better, and so should we. As an adult, I've always been grateful for the memory of walking barefoot behind my uncle's tractor in his potato field, picking the brown potatoes out of the brown earth that his harvester had just overturned. All of us kids had to help with the potato harvest, because our families would share in that bounty all through the fall, winter, and spring, and we all walked barefoot so as not to bruise any potatoes that we might step on. And I can still feel the warm, damp soil all around my feet as I looked for those hidden treasures that would eventually make their way to the potato bin that lined one whole wall of my grandparents' basement. I've always known where potatoes come from, and it's not a plastic bag in the supermarket.

And that knowledge has always shaped my prayers. When, on Sunday mornings, I bid your prayers of thanksgiving for all the blessings of this life, I hope at least some of you are remembering the farmers who grow the potatoes and the wheat and the corn and the bell peppers. I hope at least a few of you are thankful for those whose labors lie distant from the blessings that touch our lives every day. I hope that the blessings which come to your heart and mind extend beyond the circle of your immediate family and closest friends. The web of love in which we are all held is vast, and many of its strands are often invisible to us, but they are nonetheless real. To pray for that web exceeds the power of our words.

When you pray, Jesus said, do not be like the hypocrites, who love to make a spectacle of their piety. Words and street corners, synagogues and trumpets, broad phylacteries and long fringes – prayer for public consumption, in other words. Beware of that, Jesus said. Prayer isn't for show. It's for acknowledgment of where potatoes come from and communication with the one who makes potatoes possible. It's for comfort and growth. It's for guidance and strength. And prayer is to remind us who we say we are.

When we pray, we express our faith. We put into words the desires of our hearts and the thoughts of our minds. Think of the famous prayer attributed to St. Francis that begins, “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.” How many of us are instruments of God's peace?

To be an instrument of God's peace means that we are actively engaged in the business of peacemaking. It's not enough that we're not in conflict; that's like saying that a violin sitting on a shelf is a violin. That's a potential violin. A real violin makes music, and we're not peacemakers until we're actively making peace. “Blessed are the peace-makers,” Jesus said, not the potential peace-makers. We make hypocrites of ourselves when we say we're peacemakers but we devote our blood and treasure to making war or preparing to make war.

If you don't want to be a hypocrite, handle prayer with caution. Prayer that is not lived out in daily life isn't prayer at all; it's just those “empty phrases” that Jesus spoke of that the Gentiles of his day were so fond of. For prayer to be genuine, there must be a consistency between what we say and what we do.

And nobody prays, “Lord, make me a mediocre Christian. Lord, help me practice my faith when it's convenient. Lord, give me grace about half the time.”

Nobody prays like that because we know that that's not what prayer is for. Prayer isn't a mirror reflecting who we are; prayer is an expression of who we are called to be, and none of us is called to a breezy, casual, incidental, undemanding faith.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, in his book *The Meaning of Prayer*, called prayer “religion itself,” and when we pray just when we feel like it, pray incidentally or casually, or pray only from a sense of obligation or schedule, we are out of touch not just with prayer but with the heart of faith itself. We're only going through the motions.

Do not be like the hypocrites, Jesus warned, who go through the motions. Pray as if your prayers matter, because they do. Not because they're magic – we don't believe in magic, even under the guise of prayer – but because they are the heart and soul of religion.

And our midweek Lenten program this year is focused on helping us grow as people who pray. Elizabeth Leung, who has been trained in spiritual direction, will be guiding us through some of the ways we can pray, so that you can discover a way of practicing the heart and soul of your faith in a deeper, richer, more authentic and rewarding way. Our program this year isn't a *study* of prayer; it's the *practice* of prayer. We will spend our evenings together praying – with Scripture, with our Christian tradition, with pen and paper, with the arts, with the out of doors, with one another, and on our own. We will look at how we pray, why we pray, when we pray, and for what we pray. And the purpose of it all will be to open up to us a vibrant world of Christian spirituality that too many of us have whittled down to little more than asking God to give us what we want.

The Quaker writer Parker Palmer entitled one of his books *Let Your Life Speak*, and although it's a good book, I have to say that your life speaks whether you want it to or not. We all know that our actions speak far louder than our words. Whether we want them to or not, our lives reveal our prayers; what does your life say about what you're praying for?