

Holier Than Thou

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Rev. Dan Schumacher

I have to tell you, sometimes I envy those clergy from denominations who are expected to wear clerical collars. That little black mock turtle-neck with the white square right in the front is a like a billboard that says, "Watch out! I'm busy doing the Lord's work."

If you wear a clerical collar and walk with enough confidence, I bet there isn't a room in a hospital you can't get to.

If you walked into a coffee shop with that collar on, I bet people invite you to cut straight to the front of the line.

And on days when you're doubting your pastoral calling, I bet you could just put that collar on, look in the mirror, and feel renewed sense of confidence.

But, I bet there are drawbacks, too.

For instance, I bet it's hard to go anywhere without being stared at. Personally, I'm too introverted for that — I like to be anonymous from time-to-time. I don't always want everyone to know that I'm a pastor. Sometimes, I just want to be a guy at the grocery store buying Cheetos and zucchinis. It would be hard to feel like that guy if I were perusing the produce with a clerical collar on. Every time the misters came on I would feel the need to bless the veggies.

But if you ever want to know kind of what it's like to have that clerical collar on and get stared at everywhere you go, wearing ashes on your forehead in the shape of a cross is probably not a bad substitute.

I'll never forget when Ash Wednesday fell on February 14 — Valentine's Day. I was so focused on the Ash Wednesday service that I had completely forgotten it was Valentine's, and after the service Christen and I decided to walk downtown for a bite to eat.

There was only one problem. Because it was Valentines, every restaurant was booked solid. Even restaurants that don't usually take reservations had taken reservations. We kept walking into restaurants, only to be told, "Sorry, we've been booked for weeks."

When we finally found a restaurant that had an available table, we quickly discovered why. They were serving a special Valentine's Day fixed menu, priced at over a hundred dollars a person. We must have looked absolutely pitiful, because without us even asking the hostess said, "Let me go talk to the chef and see what we can do."

She came back and said, "He's willing to break from the set menu to make you a couple of cheeseburgers and fries." Maybe not the perfect start to our Lenten fast, but it was

dinner! She said, "Follow me," and led us to a table near the back. But all the way back, I kept noticing that all of these couples on their romantic dates kept staring at us as we walked back. Conversations stopped mid-sentence and heads turned our direction. They whispered to each other and sort of pointed at us. Confused, I turned to Christen and said, "Are you seeing this?? Why is everyone staring at us like that?"

Christen, in her most romantic Valentine's Day voice said, "You have an ash cross on your forehead, idiot."

Isn't it strange that one of the lectionary texts for Ash Wednesday every year is, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from you Father in heaven" (Matt. 6:1)?

In some ways, it seems like a very fitting passage for Ash Wednesday. In it, Jesus addresses the challenge of practicing piety and the temptation for it to be for show. He points to the three normative practices for people of faith that have been in place for millennia: fasting, prayer, and almsgiving — only we don't call it "almsgiving" anymore, but "charitable" giving.

The problem seems to have been that it had become a regular practice to do each of these things in such a way that it drew attention to the person practicing it. It had become a show to go out in your fine clothes with your entourage and make a scene of giving alms to the poor. Let them clamor around you, let them beg for more, let others see you do it.

Or to stand on the corner of a busy intersection and in a loud voice begin praying to God, arms spread wide, looking up to heaven — making of yourself a spectacle.

Or to fast, but when you did, to go out of your way not to bathe, not to comb your hair, not to wash your face, so that you could look the part — sullen and exhausted by your devotion to God.

Jesus had a word for such people. Hypocrites. It's a Greek word meaning an actor in a play. In other words, they were people who played a part for the sake of the audience. Jesus says people who put on the show of piety are like that, and because their goal is human attention they have already received their reward.

Piety is an old word — one that we probably too easily associate with puritanical practices or simply being a prude! Pious people are those who are saintly; who make a show of the sacrifices required to live an austere life; who are a goody two shoes; who act holier than thou. And because of that, very few want to be pious.

But in the biblical language, piety is not being a prude. Piety seeking to live a just and righteous life — not self-righteous or judgmental, but righteous in the sight of God.

You see that's the problem with the hypocrites who play-act at piety — they are doing it for the wrong eyes. So, theirs ends up being a *self*-righteousness.

But Jesus doesn't say give up piety. He says, "When you do it, do it for the right audience — not so others will see you, but so *God* will see you."

You see keeping it a secret isn't really the important part. Jesus just understood that our human nature is to seek out attention. But what if we practiced our piety in such a way that it wasn't for our benefit, but for the benefit of others? Can we even do it?

It's no easy thing to give up *self*-righteousness for being righteous in the sight of God, but we have been given examples. I'm thinking of John Newton, best known as the author of "Amazing Grace."

"A slave trader, he had grown attracted to Christianity, and one day, when he was in his ship's cabin reading a sermon of John Wesley, he suddenly saw the evil of what he was doing. He ordered the ship to turn around in mid-ocean, and returning to Africa, he set his human cargo free.

When he wrote, "Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved; How precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed," he had grasped the beauty of righteousness, he spoke the simple truth. And he himself became righteous: at its root, in Hebrew, the word means, 'one whose aim is true'" (Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*, 97).

Getting those ashes put on your forehead won't make you any holier or more pious than you were before you got them. And they will do the opposite if your goal is to demonstrate to your coworkers or the checker at the grocery store or all of the couples on romantic dates just how devout you are.

Instead, if today you decide to take the cross on your forehead, go home, take a long, hard look in the mirror, and ask yourself, "Am I seeking to be holy, or holier than thou?"

One is a journey towards God. The other has already received its reward.

Then wash the ashes off of your forehead and, in secret — with only God's eyes watching, go practice piety.

The Lord bless you and keep you;

The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you.

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. Amen.