



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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ASH WEDNESDAY

Leaning into the Heart of the Holy:
Faith's Dirty Secret
Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

You have picked a good night to be here. It is a special night, a meaningful night, because scripture and poetry collude to reveal an element of our faith that we would often rather ignore. What we learn from the gifts of scripture and poetry tonight are important for our faith in general and our Lenten journey in particular. Besides, the title, "Faith's Dirty Secret," ought to create some interest!

First, the secret. To hear Jesus talk, you would think that a true believer ought to remain in the closet. That is, after all, where Jesus suggests we should pray. I take some offense to that for public prayer is part of my job and, I think, my calling. Most Sundays I work hard to develop a prayer that voices your needs and my needs in meaningful ways. I try to find words that will be true to who you are and that will be helpful to you to hear spoken to God on your behalf. It is my hope that not only will God listen, but that each of us will listen as well and find ourselves in that prayer, knowing that our concerns are offered to God along with those of everyone else.

There are some Sundays, however, when I try to "craft" a prayer, meaning that the choice of words, the juxtaposition of phrases, and the use of poetic devices becomes more important than the prayer itself. It may sound wonderful, but it has no heart, no true grounding in your experience or mine. It is after offering one of those prayers that I remember one of my favorite prayers, spoken by a Breton fisherman: "O God, be good to me; the sea is so wide, and my boat is so small."¹ What more could be said? That bare bones, honest-to-God prayer is what true prayer is all about.

Jesus knew that when we sequester ourselves in our closets—be they small rooms in our homes, the privacy of our cars, the loneliness of a forest path, or even our own two feet of space on the pew—we get down to business and dispense with words that flower on occasion and focus on our heartfelt concerns. Praying in secret is that attitude that gets to the heart of the matter when we talk honestly with God.

¹Breton Fisherman's Prayer, *The Oxford Book of Prayer*, George Appleton, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) #422, p. 125.

Jesus also tells us that it is better to give our alms in secret. Charity is always a tricky business. We want to thank the people who generously help other people in need, but we have to balance our applause with the recognition that it is our duty to help one another. Furthermore, it is unhealthy for the community of faith if one gift is valued more than another simply because one person has more to give than another. Jesus suggests that we keep our charity secret so that the value of our gifts does not create a false sense of status within the community.

Many years ago, we had a rather unique situation in our fellowship. At one point, a member had told me that if someone ever needed help to let this person know. They would not ask for a name or circumstances, but would trust my discretion. It so happened that another member of the church was struggling with mounting health costs and declining income. They were at risk of losing their home. A phone call to the first person provided the needed funds for the second. The first person made clear that if the other person were to repay the money, it should be used to help someone else. The second begged to know their benefactor's name to thank them personally., but I had been asked not to reveal their identity. Nevertheless, the beneficiary of this generosity wrote notes on a regular basis thanking their secret friend for their kindness. The two never knew who the other was though they worshiped here together many times. It was a situation that I think pleased Jesus for it was helping for all the right reasons.

Jesus also challenges us to hide our fasting. While during Lent fasting is an option for us, in Jesus' day, fasting was required at certain times and in particular circumstances. Apparently some people liked to make it known that they were fasting by walking around looking as if they were in mortal pain. Jesus mocked such antics and suggested that since the purpose of fasting is to draw us closer to God (which ought to be a good thing), we should wash up, spruce up, and appear to the people around us to be in the best of moods, for we should be. Fasting is a personal spiritual practice. If we make a public spectacle out of it, we have already defeated its purpose. Pray, give, and fast without fanfare or accolades Jesus recommends for the ways in which we do these things indicate where we place the value of our faith. As Jesus said, wherever we place our treasure, our heart will be deposited there as well. That is the secret of faith.

But the title of this sermon is "Faith's Dirty Secret" and you really want to know the dirt, don't you?! It is exposed in the poem that is shaping our Lenten journey. Listen to the words penned by Joyce Rupp:

Lent 2001

*The cosmos dreams in me
while I wait in stillness,
ready to lean a little further
into the heart of the Holy.*

*I, a little blip of life,
a wisp of unassuming love,
a quickly passing breeze,
come once more into Lent.*

*No need to sign me
with the black bleeding ash
of palms, fried and baked.
I know my humus place.*

*This Lent I will sail
on the graced wings of desire,
yearning to go deeper
to the place where
I am one in the One.*

*Oh, may I go there soon,
in the same breath
that takes me to the stars
when the cosmos dreams in me.²*

In her poem, Joyce Rupp pours out her desire for the Lenten season which is to grow closer to God, “to go deeper to the place where I am one in the One,” as she puts it. She knows that there is one thing that must be understood for such a journey to take place. She hints at it when she describes herself as “a little blip of life, a wisp of unassuming love, a quickly passing breeze,” but she gets right to the point when she admits that it will not take the smudge of ashes to remind her of who she is for, as she says, “I know my humus place.”

Do you know your humus place? Mine is behind my shop in the very back corner of our yard. It is a compost pile where leaves, grass, and rotting vegetables become nutrient rich mulch and soil. Humus is what results from decaying plant and animal matter. It is, in essence, earth. The word for

²Joyce Rupp, “Lent 2001,” available online at: www.joycerupp.com.

humus and the term “humility” both come from the same Latin root. Our humility is our awareness of our earthiness. The biblical story tells us that God scooped up soil, fashioned it into a certain form, and breathed life into it. What a wonderful gift! What a special creature—the crowning point of creation, a creature fashioned in God’s own image! But before we get too proud and puffed up, let us remember we began as dirt, compost, humus. There is nothing special about us except what God has breathed into us.

A number of years ago I came across a phenomenal book which I found in a dollar store. It is titled *Wild: An Elemental Journey* and contains the observations and reflections of author Jay Griffiths. The book reads almost like poetry, so vivid are the images she puts on paper. I shared the book with a few people, one of whom was Bill Waters. Sometime later, Bill gave me one of his works of art which was a quote from the book with an illustration he had painted. The quote, which I had once pointed out to him, was “A rotting palm branch cradles fresh growth—death cradling new life in the palm of its hand.”³

When we are willing to “lean into the heart of the Holy,” we see things like that rotting palm branch with a seedling growing out of it and we know it has something to do with us. By trusting God’s love of us and recognizing God’s holiness, we do not fear falling when we venture in new directions or ask difficult questions or seek to change our heart. When we “lean into the heart of the Holy,” we recognize that we are little more than a bag of compost except that we are given life by God. That alone makes us special.

Humility is faith’s dirty secret. Humility enables us to recognize our needs before God and to forget what other people think we should or should not do. Humility allows us to be generous without seeking acclaim, to pray sincerely without tripping over flowery words, and to try whatever spiritual practices will help us grow in faith without trying to impress someone else. Humility keeps us grounded and makes it possible for us to grow in the likeness of Christ. Now you know faith’s dirty secret. May your humility enrich your life with the true treasures of heaven. Amen.

³Jay Griffiths, *Wild: An Elemental Journey* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2006), 39.