

Coffee to Go | Ash Wednesday | Year C

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Ash Wednesday, Lenten season, Sermon on the Mount, alms giving, prayer, fasting, benevolence, spiritual formation, divine presence.

SPEAKERS

Karin Peter, Blake Smith

Karin Peter 00:27

Welcome to Coffee to Go, where we center ourselves in the scriptures, seasons and holy days of the Christian tradition. I'm Karin Peter, here with Blake Smith, and we welcome you on the journey. The Lenten season begins today with Ash Wednesday. This is an ancient holy day in the Christian calendar, and it deals with in Scripture, ashes signify grief or sin or human mortality, as well as the joy and forgiveness and victory that comes in understanding our eternal presence with the divine. So, on Ash Wednesday, Christians often wear a smudge, if you will, of ashes on the first day of Lent as a symbol of personal repentance that they're prepared, they have prepared themselves to enter into the Lenten season. Those ashes are traditionally created by burning the palm branches that were used in the Palm Sunday Celebrations the previous year. And you'll find a lot of that in Christian traditions that have come out of the northern part of the world, and some of the Celtic traditions. The Yule log is another thing that has that similar kind of tradition, but here they burn the palm branches, save the ash and use that the following year. So, that's kind of where we are this week with Jesus. We are sitting listening to Jesus as he continues his teaching in a big, a big part of the Gospels that's called the Sermon on the Mount. And this is part of what that teaching offered. And Jesus is talking about almsgiving, prayer and fasting, and these all would have been practices that people were familiar with. So, let's hear, Blake, what Jesus has to say about these things.

Blake Smith 02:21

Okay? Well, we find ourselves today, as you said, in the Sermon on the Mount, and we are reading from the Gospel According to Matthew, the sixth chapter, and we're going to read the 1st through the 6th and the 16th through the 21st verse.

Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So, whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly, I tell you they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret, and your Father who sees in secret, will reward you. And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners so that they may be seen by others. Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you. And whenever you fast, do not look somber like the hypocrites, for they mark their faces to show others that they are

fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face so that your fasting may be seen not by others, but by your Father, who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret, will reward you. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

So why does this matter? Well, as you've said, Karin, this scripture focuses on almsgiving and prayer and fasting, and specifically what it's talking about here is really the condition of the heart, and not the acts themselves. Benevolence and almsgiving were pretty common practice in the Roman world, not just a Christian practice, but by all faiths and groups. And specifically, the Jews had long been counseled to care for the poor among them, specifically, you know, the orphans, the widows, the immigrants, words that are very politically charged these days, and especially immigrants and, but that was part of who they were. That was, they were, they were counseled for that. They were immigrants and wayward folks for much...

Karin Peter 05:27

You were foreigners in a strange land, yeah. Yeah, I wonder Blake if we could actually say not go into your private room or your closet, but go into your car and your commute and that's your, you know, prayer time. Go into the kitchen when you're washing dishes, and that's, that's, might be your, your private prayer place. Yeah, [absolutely. I think that's...] inside yourself.

Blake Smith 05:29

Yeah, for much of their time. And we think about when, when we think about this, we think about God, how God cared for the Israelites in the wilderness and took care of their needs, and for that reason, they and consequently we, are challenged to care for the needs of those among us. It's a community expression of caring for the most vulnerable in our world. And so, what's important is not the giving. It's not enough to give. One must give with a benevolent and caring heart. And so, we get these instructions about not doing it so that others can see and not praying, so that people Oh, wow, what a wonderful prayer this person gives. But we do it because of this inherent response within us to all that God has done for us and what we do in response, not just, oh, you gave me something, so I'm going to give you something or, not, because it's my obligation, because, but because our hearts have been changed, and we want to do that out of who we are. So, prayer is really one of the spiritual formation pieces that builds within us caring attitudes and actions, and not just the obligatory prayer that we say when we're assigned to be a part of a worship, but that gets again then to the heart of this, be prayerful in private, and it's, it's that honest conversation with God that's that looks inward, that really connects with the divine in a way that understands and takes kind of our focus on ourselves out of it, but looking at the at the greater picture as God would see it. So public or formal prayer isn't a substitute for this kind of private, soul-searching type of prayer we talk about when we talk about being in our closet or being in our private room. Yeah, that that's a great way to look at it, because that's actually where a lot of my prayer happens, in the car. But these, kind of, private prayers are soul searching prayers, and they come with repentance and forgiveness and healing and restoration. They provide this space for us really to be real with ourselves and with God, and that's really at the heart, I think, of what this passage is getting to and similar with fasting, because fasting is actually an active form of prayer, and when we

fast from something again, we're making space for the divine and to allow it to shape and form us in the image of God in the world. So, it's not about, oh, look at me, I gave up chocolate. Aren't I good? Because you know how much I love chocolate, but it's about allowing ourselves to be transformed, and making that space when we consume less and want less and care about others more and communities more and care for creation more fully. So again,

Karin Peter 08:18

Yeah, I appreciate that, Blake, because sometimes we forget that making space for God is making space for what's important to God, [yes] and we've had counsel on that. And it's the relationships with each other, with God, with ourselves and right now, importantly, with the earth. That's all part of our fasting, making space for what's important to God.

Blake Smith 10:00

Yeah, absolutely. And these issues are incredibly significant. Not that they haven't been forever, but we're seeing so much. The need, with regards to immigrants, with regards to creation, this time of introspection, individually and corporately, is so important, so important.

Karin Peter 10:23

Yeah, especially, I think, when we talk about Community of Christ, and we've had counsel on these issues, and we've had counsel about what it means to welcome the marginalized, to care for the poor, we're called to that, and that's regardless of our, of our political affiliation, it's regardless of who voted for who. Community of Christ has been counseled, just as the people of Israel were counseled, and we need to pay attention to that.

Blake Smith 10:54

Yeah, we were sitting at dinner last night with my daughter and her husband, and he is a high school counselor, and he was just talking about the young people who are in his office who are living in fear. They can't study. They can't... they're having a hard time functioning, not because they worried necessarily about themselves or even their immediate family, but for friends, for others. It's so deeply affecting our communities, and that's just the one piece. And then I look at my my family in Florida, who had eight inches of snow on Tuesday, you know? And it's so anyway, really, really prevalent issues for ...

Karin Peter 11:47

Absolutely and worth of all persons care for the concerns of our LGBTQIA communities, the climate crisis, these, these are not political things. These are issues in which God has already counseled us, and we need to look at some of that counsel more closely. So, what are the questions?

Blake Smith 12:11

Yes, there's some questions for us to start with, and there's so many questions, but some questions that we might ask ourselves this week are. when and why do I give, and how does my heart feel about my giving? We get, hopefully get to the heart of some of those questions about, is this obligation, or is it because I just want to do that? Second question would be, what kind of prayers do I pray? Are they just the formal prayers at meals or the ones that I do in front of others when I'm assigned to do so, or are

there personal reflective prayers that I engage in, or other types of prayer. And finally, as we enter the Lent season, how shall I fast for Lent? Remember that fasting isn't just about giving up the thing that you have every day, your favorite thing for 40 days that you do as just, oh, an obligation. How will you fast for Lent?

Karin Peter 13:25

Yeah, how am I going to make space for what's important to God in my life during the Lenten season? So that really encapsulates what our experience for Ash Wednesday is, and we usually say for this week, but I'm going to say for the Lenten season, it might be more appropriate to participate in the coming reign of God without the concern about how others are going to see us or judge us or perceive us. Sometimes we become so driven by what the expectations of others are, or what we assume other people think about us. We're worried if we're going to look stupid or, Oh I can think of a number of words, but probably none of them are appropriate for a public podcast. So, let's just say, or maybe we're afraid to look uninformed or uncool. Maybe that's the way I want to phrase that. So, for this Lenten season, attend to your spirit and your spiritual wellbeing by giving and praying and fasting in ways that speak to your heart without regard for what others think. If you're a person that prays over your food at home, but you never do when you go out, because you're worried what other people are going to think well, then pray silently to yourself when you go out and don't worry about that. There's a liberation in freeing ourselves from the concern about how. Others think about us or see us, and that liberating experience is in itself a sense of fasting to give up the fear of how others perceive us, and that would be really healthy going into this Lenten season,

Blake Smith 15:23

it would be healthy. I just want to put a plug in there for those who will find this incredibly difficult, because, you know, we say and we hear all of our lives, it doesn't really matter what other people think about us. What it matters is how God looks at us. But it's tough. It probably took me till about 30, at the age of 30, before I started saying, Well I don't care what they think.

Karin Peter 15:47

Yeah, yeah, it's hard. I mean, I'm a fairly progressive Christian. That's how I would kind of label myself. And every once in a while, I'm on an airplane, somebody asked me what I do, and I'm so worried about what somebody is going to think when I respond, you know, it's still, it's still part of me, but for this Lenten season, I'm going to try really hard. [There you go.] Aside.

Blake Smith 16:09

Me too, and I say I It wasn't until 30 I still care about what people think.

All right, our blessing today is about, "For Caring Less About the Opinions of Others," and it comes from the Book of Common Prayer.

Our God in whom we trust strengthen us, not to regard over much who is for us or against us, but to see to it that we be with you in everything we do.

Well thanks for joining us on this Ash Wednesday. We invite you to join us next time at Coffee to Go for the next part of our journey through the liturgical seasons and holy days of the Christian tradition.