

## **Ash Wednesday February 26 2020**

### **Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

In the Gospel of John at the Last Supper, as Jesus washes the feet of his disciples he says, "I give you a new commandment- Love one another. Just as I have loved you so you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples. If you love one another."

Love is not what we as followers of Jesus are known by in the United States today. In the last ten years, the percentage of Americans who self-describe as Christian has dropped from just over  $\frac{3}{4}$  to just under  $\frac{2}{3}$ . Those who describe themselves as having no religious affiliation, "nones", has risen to 26% of the population.

What it means to be Christian in the United States is often equated with what gets seen by the most people. The latest data shows about 25% of the US population is Evangelical Protestant (SBC is the largest of these Evangelical Protestant denominations). Because of that large percentage and things like Evangelical Protestants and their views being well represented on Fox News (the most watched network with 2.5 million viewers a night in 2019) their take on the Christian faith is what many Americans associate with all of Christianity.

So, what do people think of Christians based on what is seen, particularly the younger generations (millennials and z which are about 51% of the US population)? According to multiple surveys, when most people think about Christians it's about issues. (abortion, gay marriage) And about what Christians (or at least this one branch) are against. What they condemn. And often what is

being condemned are people. The Christian church is known more for sex scandals (Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church in particular) than for their charitable work. The general view of the church, especially among younger generations, is that it is full of judgmental hypocrites who hate people. At least people who aren't like them. It's seen as a club for the righteous, the holier than thou.

Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples. If you love one another."

What these younger generations (and I would argue all human beings) are looking for is a place where they will be welcomed fully- regardless of who they are. They want to be in a place that makes a difference in the lives of people who are in need. They want to be part of a group that feeds the hungry. And for many of the younger generation it is not just from afar, through putting money into the offering plate. They want to be part of a group that actually goes and makes a difference. That enters into relationship with people who are not like them- to find out that they are just like them. People with hopes and dreams. With fears and foibles. People who are just trying to get by in this world.

People want to live the life of faith that looks always to the good of the other. They want to question and struggle with their faith with other believers. They want a full, open, and honest relationship with others. Where they feel free to share their shortcomings, receive forgiveness, and strive together to live better lives.

And they don't think they can find it here. In the Body of Christ.

Now, while we are not perfect at it, we do many of those things at St. John and within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America- our denomination. We feed the hungry, we serve the most vulnerable- especially children here in our state through Lutheran Services of Iowa. But because we aren't the majority denomination in the US- people don't see us. One of the things we need to be better about as people of faith is sharing what we do- so people see us being church. Loving our neighbors as ourselves. Loving one another.

Our Gospel text today is one that warns of the dangers of practicing our piety in order to be seen by others and receive their praise. And yet, we are to witness to our faith, to the hope that is in us. We are to love one another in action and in truth. We are to live out our faith.

When we don't share- when we keep our faith to ourselves. Keep it private. The reality of who we are and what we do dies. Or at least is buried by another reality, one that is more on display. The danger in sharing is that we move into some kind of performance for others – the word hypocrite in our text literally refers to the masks worn by actors on stage during the Roman Empire. The mask they put on is the character they play, not the person they really are. Don't be that! Jesus says.

We do acts of generosity ,fasting, prayer, care for one another, care for those who are in need; those in prison, those who society says aren't worth anything because as Children of God we know that the mercy, grace, love and abundance we have received from God is not some finite resource to be hoarded, but an overflowing cup to be shared!

There is always a tension between living out our faith in front of others and doing so desiring their praise and attention. Perhaps a good question to ask is whether the desire of my witness is to have people say of me, “What a righteous dude!” Or is my desire to grow closer to the God who has claimed me? Do we do these things so people might think better of us, or even to get people to come into our doors? Or do we live our faith overtly because it is part of who we are, just like we make known that we like football, will do anything for Dove chocolate, ride our bikes on the trail, saw the best video on Youtube the other day. We share these things without shame or self-consciousness because it is who we are. We do not do it because of what it might benefit us (or think about how it might hinder us) in our life. This is how we should live out our faith.

Where your treasure is- there your heart will be also.

The idea in these words of Jesus is that your goal or what you consider important will determine the course of your activity and commitment. Your values are lived out, not spoken. And yet, values are not just acted, performed for others. A mask you put on so people will think something of you. They are central to who you are.

Do your actions match what you say you value? That you believe? Do our actions as St. John match what we say we value? What we believe?

I dare say, if we take those questions seriously, there is much for us to repent of my fellow believers; both as individuals and as the Body of Christ. There is much for us to learn as we follow Jesus this Lent as he walks towards what he knows will be his death- but one that ultimately will give us life. Life fuller and more abundant than anything we could have apart from God. A life of meaning, of joy,

of walking with a community that loves one another- even when they don't particularly like each other. Of having a purpose beyond the accumulation of stuff.

I pray that this Lent we can trust God and one another enough to put off our masks and stand before God and before each other revealing the reality of who we are, people who sometimes are petty, who sometimes are selfish, who sometimes do seek our own gain at the expense of others. People who are broken, imperfect, what the apostle Paul used to call "cracked pots"

When we remove all pretense about ourselves, when we receive the mercy, forgiveness, and grace that God has shown us from others. Then...we can become more like the people God has called us to be.

The ashes we will bear on our heads shows us the reality we live in. We are people who have come from dust and will go to dust- at a time and place not of our choosing. We are totally dependent upon the God who has created and claimed us.

This Lent, let us together risk trusting in that one who claims us, who loved us enough to send Jesus, God's own Son, to die so that we might live.

Just as I have loved you, Jesus says, love one another. And this is how the world will know that you are my disciples- by your love.

May this be so.