

Pastor Jon's Ash Wednesday Sermon 2023

Several years ago I watched a YouTube video of a young Eastern Indian boy asking "What do you practice?" It was the cutest thing and yet very convicting. To find out later, he actually was quoting an Indian philosopher named Prem Rawat. His videos got taken down for a while. But they are now back up with the proper permissions.

He says, "What do you practice? Whatever you practice, you'll get good at. If you practice complaining, you will get very good at it. You will be able to complain about everything. If you practice anger you will get very good at it. You will get so good at it, that you will find fault with everything.

So what do you practice? If you practice peace, you'll get very good at it. If you practice joy in your life, you'll get very good at it. If you practice knowing yourself, you'll get very good at it. You will know who you are. When you begin to know yourself, you begin to realize what a gift you are, and the value of every breath that you are being given – Prem Rawat

Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent is really about realizing what a gift you are and value of every breath you have been given. It is a time we tell the truth about ourselves and face our own mortality. There has always been something very sobering about tracing an ash cross on people's heads, especially on children, saying, remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.

So how does Jesus want us to practice our faith according to the Sermon on the Mount? Humbly, in secret, and for God... not for the recognition of others.

In our Gospel from Matthew 6 in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus assumes his followers will practice their piety... the word is actually practicing righteousness or justice in the original Greek. Practicing righteousness, or being in a right relationship with God. Or Justice. Practicing Justice has a different ring to it than practicing our piety. Of course, Jesus wants his followers to practice the marks of the faith, which are works of love(almsgiving), fasting, and praying. However,

he warns his disciples and us to “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them.”

Jesus calls people who fast, pray, or give alms so others can see how religious they are, hypocrites. A hypocrite is literally a stage actor. Someone who wears a mask... a pretender. In a way we are all hypocrites because we all sin and fall short of the glory of God daily.

But that is not the end of the story. After you receive your ash cross, and reminded of our mortality, we will hear words of forgiveness. That cross on your forehead represents your baptism and Jesus’ work on the cross. It is for our forgiveness.

Finally Jesus tells us not to store up earthly treasures that moth and rust can consume. Instead store up treasures in heaven. When we find our deepest treasure as God’s free gift to us in Jesus Christ, we are storing up treasure in heaven. For where your treasure is your heart will be also.