

Matthew 6:1-8: "Down on the Corner"
Matt Gaventa, March 9, 2011

The thing about ash is that it gets everywhere.

Last year on Ash Wednesday I was at a Presbyterian service in New York City in which we did the imposition of ashes, the traditional ashen cross placed on the forehead as a symbol of sin, death, and redemption. Unfortunately, by time I got home I was a mess. I must have rubbed my forehead at some point on the train ride. By time I got home it was like I had rolled around in a pile of fresh newspapers. It doesn't look like much, but it gets everywhere, and, honestly, it's kind of a relief to be here at Chestnut Hill without ashes in sight – and a relief to my car, my clothes, my washing machine, and, certainly, to my wife, who is expecting our first child in May and will apparently therefore have two small boys in the house.

By no coincidence whatsoever at that same Ash Wednesday service I listened to this very text from Matthew 6. It struck me then, as it does now, as a profoundly challenging choice for Ash Wednesday. "Beware of practicing your piety before others..." Okay, that's great, but I came here for the ashes. "When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret." Yes, yes, I heard you – but can you just put the mark on my forehead so I can go in peace?

That same, challenging, frustrating text. And then I stood in line and had the cross of ashes put upon my forehead, and I walked out into a Wednesday afternoon in lower Manhattan, and I hustled through the crowded streets of the global city with a big sign on my face that said "Pious guy, walking here" And I could see them all thinking: "This guy went to a church service in the middle of the day? I mean, really! Doesn't he have a job? Doesn't he have responsibilities? Doesn't he at least have some soap? Did he even listen to the Gospel: 'don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray on the street corners, to be seen by others.'" A funny thing to preach on the day when Christians worldwide mark their foreheads with the physical sign of death and repentance.

Now, we won't do an imposition of ashes here tonight. It's not a traditional part of Presbyterian liturgy, and maybe that's because we've already got this passage figured out. Hypocrites pray on the street corners. When you pray, go to your room; close the door. Do it in the privacy of your own home – it's where prayer and piety belong. Keep it in its box. You want to give something up for Lent? Fine, do it on your own time. Don't make a big deal about it, you know what I mean, don't rub my nose in it. And seriously *don't* put it on Facebook. "Steve is thinking about giving up chocolate for Lent." Well, Steve, here's my status update: Matt thinks Steve should just keep it to himself.

So maybe this passage isn't as hard as I thought. It turns out we are perfectly happy to do piety on our own time. People praying on street corners – well, that's not Chestnut Hill. That's Westboro Baptist, screaming "God hates Fags" at military funerals and profiting on the lawsuits. That's not Chestnut Hill: demure, well-behaved, respectable Chestnut Hill. Here at Chestnut Hill we know exactly where our faith belongs and – more to the point – we know where it doesn't belong. We're off the hook for this one, right? Sermon's over, let's go home. Like I said, we're not doing the ashes, so, I guess, Go with God?

Unfortunately, Jesus isn't that easy. To be honest, he's being a bit cheeky. Prayer, fasting, social charity – these are all regimented parts of community life for Jewish Jerusalem, for Matthew's audience. It's all straight out of the Old Testament law; there are certain obligations. You pray in certain ways, at certain times. You give a certain amount to the unfortunate. You *do* piety. If it so happens that the time for prayer comes while you're out at the market, you have an obligation to stop and pray, even right there at the street-corner. So this passage isn't about street-corners, and he knows it.

This passage is about hypocrisy. The word doesn't mean here exactly what you think it means. In its time the Greek word ὑποκριταὶ is quite simply the word for a stage actor: someone playing a part, someone who steps into a character, and says one thing while being another. Now, before I go any further, it's a metaphor: Jesus isn't indicting the local theatre troupe or lobbying the Roman governor to cut off funding for the arts. But he is relying on the simplicity of the image: an actor in performance, a world separate from that of its audience. When Patrick Stewart steps onto the grass for Shakespeare in the Park, hunches over, and begins "Now is the winter of our discontent" ... he's no longer in Manhattan, but removed far across the space of imagination into the England of Richard III. He can separate our world from his without even using a stage. Hypocrite.

This is what hypocrisy is for Jesus here in Matthew 6: it's the idea that faith is on a stage, and the world is everywhere else, that you can put up a curtain between how you relate to God and how you relate to the world. Hypocrisy is trying to live in two kinds of places: a place for piety, and then a place for everything else. A place for prayer, and then a place for everything else. When Jesus says "Go to your room" – surely a favorite verse among young parents everywhere – it's not because the privacy of your own home is somehow a "better" place for piety. It's because taking away the audience is the only way he can ensure that we pray from who we are, not for what we want to look like. It's about *being* Christian in all places instead of searching for the right place to act like one.

This is exactly where we miss the point. It's easy enough to judge the self-promoting and self-perpetuating Westboro Baptist protests: hypocrites, stage actors, putting on skits in the public arena in which they claim the will of God for their own hateful agenda. Yes, I think Jesus would have harsh words for such stagecraft; In fact I have fantasies about just such a conversation. Real piety, he would say, doesn't need an audience. Real piety can't happen when it needs everyone to see. But this is where we jump to conclusions, where we hear what we want to hear, if we say that piety can therefore *only* happen where nobody can see. That's not what it says, and for all of the vitriol of my imaginary Westboro comeuppance, Jesus would have just as harsh a critique for those of us entirely too comfortable staging our faith only in the privacy of our own room. The stage changes, but the judgment stays the same: hypocrites.

After the service, I walked from lower Manhattan to Penn Station, lazily seeking the next train back to Princeton. By then it was late afternoon, and the exercise was enough to gum up the cross on my forehead, even in a cold Manhattan February. By time I reached the station I was fairly sure that my ashen cross, the symbol of sin and redemption, was now largely indistinguishable from the cloud of dirt, soot, smog, and grime that generally occupies the first twenty feet of city atmosphere. By all appearances I wasn't going to be the first person that day to walk into Penn Station needing to wash New York off my face.

But then I started to notice something. Penn Station, midweek afternoon rush hour. I don't do this every day, so I'm the guy cutting across lanes of pedestrian traffic, trying to follow signs instead of the herd. Every local in that station is annoyed with me for at least a split second, that out-of-towner with dirt on his face. It's a strangely-organized form of chaos, but then I start to notice something. I start to notice that I'm not the only one. That businesswoman, dressed for success, clinging to her Blackberry – with ashes on her forehead. The young hipster, maybe a student, probably on the train to Park Slope – but there's a mark of the cross right where I can see it, no more distinct than mine and yet no less obvious. Here, in Penn Station, the churning underbelly of secularized, public and private, church and state, strictly divided America, here in the raging center of the whole thing, the street-corner to beat all street-corners, even here, the signs of sin and death and resurrection. Nobody was looking. Nobody was performing. Frankly, I don't know what you'd have to do to get the attention of a Penn Station commuter crowd but putting a little burnt palm leaf on your face isn't even going to scratch the surface. But it felt like transgression, like a small insurrection in which we were all moving parts, a revolution against the hypocrisy that faith should stay in its place.

Don't hear me wrong. I'm not out to legislate school prayer, or Bibles in courthouses, or any of the issues of social and governmental policy that sit at this intersection. We don't live in Biblical Jerusalem and in fact there is blessedly little about modern community life that regiments expressions of piety. If you're not sure about this, head down Germantown Ave until you get to Center City, pick a busy street corner, and start praying, as loudly as possible. I guarantee you people won't think you're showing off your piety. They'll think something, but not that.

But I am here to say this: the Christian Gospel is a transgressive thing. It turns the sin of Ash Wednesday into the triumphant redemption of Good Friday. It turns the death on Cavalry into the empty tomb of Easter Sunday. It is the living, breathing movement of the Holy Spirit; it is contagious, and messy, and transformative: it respects no box, no border, no boundary.

And so this Lent, if you are setting off a part of your life as a discipline of preparation, know this: Christian faith lives to respond to the Gospel in its every moment, in every time and place. Fast, or don't fast. Give up chocolate, caffeine, carbon, or don't. Pray every morning, or every evening. Kierkegaard said that prayer changes the one who prays, so pray as openness to the movement of the Gospel, on the street-corner or in your room. Shut the door if you want. God *will* break through.

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