

“Could it be that simple?”

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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Standing here before you, I am tempted to pinch myself. Am I, the child of a Pentecostal preacher, really leading worship with a Catholic priest and a Baptist minister? As a Lutheran, no less! God must have a sense of humor.

As a teenager, the idea of an ecumenical Ash Wednesday service was no laughing matter. I took very seriously the threat of eternal damnation facing my friends and family members who did not wholly devote themselves to Jesus as we did in my Pentecostal church. Walking through the neighborhood, I would pray for households with a statue of the Virgin Mary in their front yard. *Lord, forgive them!* On yearly visits to spend time with my grandmother in El Salvador, I would scoff at her devotion to saints and her ritual participation in mass. *Lord, lead her into the truth!* Jesus’s caution against outward signs of piety rang in my ears, even while I divided the world between faithful “insiders” and damned “outsiders,” between “us” and “them.”

I started following Jesus certain of my destination, but he led me beyond my boundaries to journey with so-called outsiders. Jesus’s path detoured away from heaven, winding its way up Golgotha’s hill, and taking an unexpected turn at an empty tomb. That road led me here, to all of you, my siblings in Christ, that we may travel toward Easter together.

Our Gospel reading invites us to imagine ourselves sitting at the Savior’s feet. The teachings of the Sermon on the Mount that we’ve heard in Matthew are intimate instructions to the disciples, and, like the disciples, we come from many different places in life yet are all one in the Lord. Leading up to this moment, Jesus is healing, responding to the needs of the impoverished, followed by crowds hungry to be free from social and economic exclusion.

Now, in his teaching about how we relate to God, Jesus is making a subtle point about our relationship to the whole community. “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing ... go into your room and shut the door and pray ... do not look dismal like the hypocrites.” In all that we do to live out our faith, Jesus calls for a kind of unselfconsciousness. I can hear the Lord’s gentle voice saying, *Those worries about being good enough are weighing you down. Set them aside. Simply give. Simply fast. Simply pray. Simply be.*

Could it be that simple? This evening, we dare to trust that it is so. Today we will remove the TikTok filter, unpose for the Instagram post, and unburden our hearts. We will acknowledge our imperfect humanity and tell some hard-to-hear truths. We will

confess when we have turned the other way when our neighbor was in need, how we have neglected the world's suffering and injustice. We will lay bare our binaries between "us" and "them," how from our first breath we have been taught that some people are better than others. In our longing simply to be, authentic and open to connection, we will stand in our shared need of redemption.

Our redeemer does not stand apart from us; God is close at hand to create new hearts within us. We hear the prophet's call to return to the Lord, and find that the Lord has first turned to us, gracious and merciful. Indeed, God abounds in love so much that God transcends our boundaries and meets us in a human body, whose outstretched hands are vulnerable to the bite of nails. Such embodied love reminds me of words from theologian and Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor: "God chose to bring [ashes] to life. We are certainly dust and to dust we shall return, but in the meantime our bodies are sources of deep revelation for us. They are how we come to know both great pain and great pleasure. They help us to recognize ourselves in one another. They are how God gets to us, at the most intimate and universal level of all." Dust and ashes, sweat, blood, and stories—we do not need to burden our being with facades of flawless perfection or worries about being good enough. God in Christ is ready to bless us, just as we are.

In a moment we will hear ancient words lifted from Genesis: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." You will be invited to receive ashes on your forehead, a symbol of our finitude, our frailties and failings. Yet those ashes will be traced in the shape of the cross, a reminder that the One who shaped you from dust joins you in dust. It is the same cross with which we are marked at baptism, linking us together: my Pentecost siblings and my Roman Catholic grandmother, my newfound Lutheran family and disciples who dig deep in their traditions for gifts to share. And there are more besides, all of us making up one resurrected body, Christ Jesus our head and beating heart.

Friends, blessings to you on your Lenten journeys. May Jesus make us traveling companions to one another, with whom we can risk vulnerability. May the Spirit release us from shame and scorn and settled ideas. Should you leave this place with ashes on your forehead, may they be a declaration to the world of God's undying love for dust, no matter what shape it is in. Amen.

Note: I preached a version of this sermon at an Ash Wednesday service jointly sponsored by Catholic and Protestant campus ministries at Ithaca College, February 26, 2020. At the time, I served the college community as Director of the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life.