

Please! Some Genuine Humility!

Ash Wednesday

February 17, In the Year of Our LORD, 2010

First Congregational United Church of Christ

Gloversville, New York

The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Isaiah 58:1-2 and Matthew 6:1-8, 16-21

Isaiah's words are twenty-five hundred years old – and yet how they can sting! In the words we just heard, God accused the people of Jerusalem of poor motivations if not downright hypocrisy in their fasting, in their wearing sackcloth and covering themselves with ashes – and oh, how safe it is to read those words in the context of those people who lived so long ago – and then how unsettling it is to pause and wonder if they are appropriate for us to hear today.

We need to make sure on this Ash Wednesday, at the beginning of our Season of Lent, that we know what we are doing and why – and heaven forbid any of it be “for show!” God accused the people of professing:

“I am humble!

I pray!

I know all of the motions!

I know all of the litanies,

... and all of that can get me right with God.

Perhaps if I put on sackcloth, perhaps if I put ashes on my face, perhaps if I fast, people will notice, ah, better yet, God will notice – and I will be right with God.”

That begs the question: what is genuine humility – and what is genuine faith? What if what I am doing is only so that I will *appear* humble, *seem* humble, come across to other people as genuinely humble if not devout. Perhaps I can fool some of these people some of the time – but I can't fool my God.

In Isaiah, and then in the words of Jesus as quoted in Matthew, there is an accusation that after time, people begin to repeat words by rote, recite the words of the prayers to the point that they no longer have meaning – or worse, that they are said in public so that others will see ones supposed piety.

Isaiah and Jesus beg the question – do we really know what we are saying when we pray? Do we know why we do what we do? Jesus' concern for how His followers prayed led Him to share the words we heard from the sixth chapter of Matthew just now – and the verses that come between verse 8 and verse 16? Those would be the words of our LORD's Prayer which we will share together in a few moments.

Isaiah's words are stinging

- if we fast but forget the needs of so many who are hungry
- if we sacrifice during these forty days, perhaps even do with less – buy fewer creature comforts for ourselves, but forget to provide for those in need

- if we pray more – and in particular if we do so all the more in public or in public view, but don't really mean it – or only pray for ourselves and forget the needs of others then perhaps this season of Lent will leave us as empty as we have ever been.

But to quote Isaiah, if we look inside our hearts and find the means to

- work to loosen the bonds of injustice
- undo the thongs of the yokes and let the oppressed go free
- share bread with the hungry
- house the homeless poor,
- cover the naked,
- and in so doing embrace some genuine humility, ...

ah, then, ... we might very well hear these words of God – for they are so beautiful:

... your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator will go before you the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am! (Isaiah 58:8-9)

.....

Let us pray:

God, our Creator, we come seeking Your guidance for this journey of Lent – for we truly wish to be Your grateful and humble servants.

When we think we know what You want for our lives, we pray that we may not only seek to be right with You, to be reconciled to You, but to also seek justice and grace for all of Your people. When we think we know how we ought to worship, we pray that we may be sure to worship You in truth, with open hearts and minds and souls that we might become true sisters and brothers in faith.

When we think we know what it is to be faithful servants, we pray that we would learn from those of our midst who have died and are now with You, that You might lift our eyes to the celebration they know with You in glory that we might celebrate the legacy they left behind for us to follow here on earth.

When we think we know how to pray, may we listen to the Only Begotten One's invitation to join in the words of the prayer He taught:

Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.