

CURSORY FAITH

Matthew 6:1-6

My mom had a habit of leaving notes listing specific chores she wanted us to accomplish when we came home from school. When I was a sophomore in high school, my older sister Monique had major surgery at Boston Children's Hospital to help her walk better as a polio survivor. With three younger siblings at home, I was the primary baby sitter – watching them after school, making supper and performing whatever chores Mom assigned. One afternoon I came home to the following note: “Darling Tizzy, please do a cursory dusting of the downstairs as Eileen did not come today. Love, Mom” Not totally familiar with the word cursory I consulted our ever-present dictionary and learned the following: “cursory: 1. performed hastily, with scant attention to detail; 2. not thorough.” Since that time cursory has been my very favorite adjective to use with regard to any kind of cleaning!!

When it comes to faith, however, cursory faith does not quite cut it. When I take the above cursory definition and couple it with faith, I picture the kind of Christians who attend church, “because it is what we do on Sunday.” They are no less a Christian than you or I, but they merely scratch the surface of all God has for them. A Cursory Faith is one that we put on Sunday mornings, but leave behind us as we walk out of the church. A Cursory Faith is one we pull on when the going gets tough, but it is a faith that has much more to do with our own selfish interests than who Jesus is calling us to become. The poor monk in the following anecdote would probably be considered to have cursory faith.

A young Catholic priest decided to enter a monastery. He joined one particularly strict sect. The head monk told him, at his indoctrination, that they were sworn to TOTAL silence. They could not speak one word at all. However, every ten years, they would be permitted to speak two words. After 10 years of total silence, the head monk indicated it was now time for him to speak his two words. The monk said, "Bed hard!" And then he resumed his silent study and work. Another 10 years passed, and the head monk again indicated it was time for him to speak his two words. The monk said, "Food bad!" And then he resumed his silent study and work. Another 10 years passed, and the head monk again indicated it was time for him to speak his two words. The monk said, "I quit!" The head monk shook his head and said, "I knew this was coming. You've done nothing but complain for the past 30 years!" (Homiletics Online Illustrations)

I hardly think this is what Jesus had in mind in this teaching of how his followers should practice the faith. Jesus actually describes the faith of a cursory Christian in our text from Matthew this morning: verses 1-4 from The Message: “*Be especially careful when you are trying to be good so that you don't make a performance out of it. It might be good theater, but the God who made you won't be applauding.*”

This principle of doing acts of godliness without concern for being seen can fly in the face of temptations shaped by social pressures. Our culture values size and “success” a trait that has not only been supported by social media but has in fact been one of the main reasons people share their accomplishments ad nauseum on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Which leads directly in

the following statements from Jesus: *“When you do something for someone else, don’t call attention to yourself. You’ve seen them in action, I’m sure – ‘playactors’ I call them – treating prayer meeting and street corner alike as a stage, acting compassionate as long as someone is watching, playing to the crowds. They get applause, true, but that’s all they get. When you help someone out, don’t think about how it looks. Just do it – quietly and unobtrusively. That is the way your God, who conceived you in love, working behind the scenes, helps you out.”*

In this age of church marketing with an eye to the decline of all the major mainline denominations we are being hit on all sides of the importance of publicizing the ministry of Marquis, St. Paul’s, Augusta Street...all the churches in the Staunton District. On the one hand this seems contradictory to the words of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew, but the critical factor has to do with our attitude toward doing acts of mercy. We need to let others know about the ministries our churches offer – Jesus is speaking to our motivation for good works.

John Wesley speaks to this within his rules: *“Do good...it is expected of all that they should continue to evidence their desire for salvation by doing good; by being in every kind merciful after their power; doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible to all.”* (Feasting on the Word, page 22) While Wesley does not directly instruct in this passage the importance of having the proper attitude for acts of mercy, Jesus’ words certainly do. Yes, we do good to help others, but some also *“do good,”* hoping to receive some social benefit in return – receiving a tax deduction, obtaining community service credit, increasing a network of contacts with not-for-profit boards, or how about this – because it will look good on a resume or even a college application? (Feasting, 22).

In light of this, Jesus is giving us a clear framework for examining our motives, and there is no better time to do this than the season of Lent. Even today’s Gospel text ‘doing good’ to give to the needy, to pray, or to fast – can become an occasion of bragging. It is important to note that this attitude of examination does not contradict Jesus’ earlier reproach in Matthew 5:14-16 (NIV) *“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”* Rather, Jesus is referring specifically to acts of Jewish piety: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. Jesus’ words in chastising his followers for doing this for show emphasizes the importance that when we do make these kinds of sacrifice, we do so that our actions will lift up our Savior, not ourselves. The late Rev. Peter Gomes likens Lent to a time of spiritual practice.

“Why bother with Lent? Because it allows for us, for me in particular, a form of spiritual practice. The musicians understand this, that is, the good ones understand it at least. And no musician will remain a good musician long without regular practice. It is a discipline, this practice that enables freedom; not a freedom that avoids discipline. Horowitz, the great pianist said, “If I skip practice one day, I know it. If I skip practice two days, the critics know it. And if I skip practice three days, everybody knows it.” Lent is Christian practice time. It is spring training for the Christian who wants to stay in shape, or who wants to get into shape. Such spiritual health and the means

to it is not a luxury. It is a necessity. No one is so well off spiritually that he or she can afford to skip Lent. And no one is so bad off spiritually that Lent can't be helpful. (Homiletics online, illustrations)

So, how can you and I have a good Lent? Ultimately, this is between you and God. If you are open to some suggestions, I am more than happy to share some with you. I came across the following novel suggestions this past week in my study which are worth sharing. They are offered by Debra Farrington who authored the book, *Living Faith Day by Day: How the Sacred Rules of Monastic Traditions Can Help You Live Spiritually in the Modern World* (Perigee, 2000). She writes, "What most of us neglect – with more regularity than we might care to admit – is God," So Farrington suggests, "Don't give up chocolate for Lent this year. Or rather, give up chocolate – or whatever else you give up – if it helps you think about God more often. But if all it does is make you think about chocolate, then let me suggest some other Lenten practices to you.

"Have a heart-to-heart with God." She suggests taking time for a long walk or going to a secluded place to simply converse with God, as you would with an old friend that you have neglected to share from the heart. "Don't forget to do some listening as well," she adds.

"Cut back on work." According to one newscast, Americans, on average, added one week of work per year to their schedules in the 1990s. Rather than putting your work at the center of your life, Farrington suggests taking a break from working too hard this Lent and spend some of the newfound free time with God in prayer, reflection or spiritual reading.

"Sleep enough." John Cassian, one of the desert fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries, recognized that having a good relationship with God takes energy and attentiveness. He recommended to his disciples that they get enough sleep so they could vigorously pursue their spiritual lives. Farrington writes, "Make Lent a time for getting rested so you, too, can attend to God without the heaviness of spirit that lack of sleep induces."

"Seek a spirit of detachment." Most Americans own more things than we need. Often our sense of self-worth and confidence is centered on our possessions rather than on our relationship with God as beloved children. Farrington suggests taking a break from buying unnecessary things and give the money you save to an organization that serves the impoverished and marginalized.

And finally, "Take care of yourself," As the apostle Paul writes (1 Corinthians 3:16), our bodies are temples. So take steps to care for God's dwelling place during Lent. Exercise, eat better, take time for leisure and play, being aware than in doing so you are caring for one of God's great gifts.

I have never before seen these suggestions, and I think they are wonderful. However you do decide to observe a "Good Lent," let it be a matter of prayer between you and your Lord. Be open and listen to Jesus' voice. You may be quite surprised with the suggestions you might hear. Ultimately, use this time to fall deeper in love with your Lord and Savior; to become more and more the man or woman God created you to be. Give God complete control over how you can glorify the Son during these next weeks.

In closing listen to the following story of what can happen when a person has a cursory faith shortchanging the mighty acts God wanted to do in his life:

Some years ago, a Buddhist monk traveled from Vietnam to New York to take part in a gathering of American veterans of the Vietnam War. All were feeling wounded in some way, either physically or deep within their spirits. As a way of leading them gently in the direction of healing, the monk told them a story.

During the course of that terrible war, a Vietnamese man was making a living as a peddler. When his wife died, he was forced to leave his 5-year-old son with neighbors as he traveled from village to village, selling his wares.

It so happened that the peddler returned to his home village one day, only to find it completely destroyed. Looking for some sign of his son and of the life he knew, he started digging through the charred remains of a hut that looked very much like the one his neighbors had lived in. Sifting through the ashes, he found a pile of small, human bones. He felt sure they must be the remains of his child. Lovingly he gathered them up and placed them in a cloth bag. From that day onward, he carried the bones with him at all times, a symbol of his grief and loss.

Years went by. One night, just before dawn, he heard knocking at his door. The knocking was urgent. The man called out from his bed, "Who's there?"

"My father!" cried a young man's voice from the other side of the door. "I am your son." "Go away," replied the man. "My son is dead."

"But, father," continued the voice from out of the dark, "when our village was attacked, I wasn't killed. I was kidnapped and taken away. I served my captors for years, but at long last I escaped. I've come home to you!"

"Go away," muttered the old man, becoming more annoyed by the minute. "Do not mock me in my grief." At last the knocking ceased. The son went away, never to return.

And so, concluded the monk, "The son was rejected, because his father loved a bag of bones more than his real, flesh-and-blood offspring." How often is such a story repeated, again and again, in real life – as we hold tightly to a vision of God's activity in the world that's just too small?"

Don't ever settle for a cursory faith. Our God is the God of all things and as the scriptures tell us in Luke 1:37 "*Nothing is impossible with God!*" And Matthew 19:26 "*Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."*"

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.