

*Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in love. Amen.*

What do you say, when someone asks you, "How's it going? How have you been?" "Fine"? "Good"? Or do you say what I say way too often and what I hear even more often? "Busy. I'm busy."

Why that answer? Why do we say that? Maybe we really are busy – there's nothing wrong with that. But why do we want other people to know that we're busy? Well, because busyness gets us approval. It shows our importance. Busyness is a modern American status symbol.

This is not, however, a new phenomenon. Nor is it confined only to the secular side of life. In fact, in today's Gospel, Jesus talks about this, and he gets to **the heart of the matter**. He identifies a universal, inescapable human need by talking about three things that people busied themselves doing. They gave money to charity (**6:2**), they prayed (**6:5**), and they fasted (**6:16**).

Now, those are all decent, good, godly, religious activities. But there was a problem. When people gave to charity, they gave with all kinds of fanfare. When they prayed, they prayed out on busy street corners. And when they fasted, they made sure to look extra gloomy so that everybody knew what they were doing.

In other words, they were doing these decent, good, godly, religious things for this specific reason: they practiced their **"righteousness in front of others to be seen by them" (6:1)**. Just like we can leverage our busyness to get recognition, they did all these things to be applauded by other people.

And in the two thousand years since Jesus first spoke these words, not much has changed. We still do decent, good, godly, religious activities. Every morning you read your Bible in the wee hours over a cup of coffee. Every week you go to church. Every month you wear out the binding of your *Meditations* booklet. Every year you give to charity, to church, to mission work, to community.

But not only do we do those things, we also share the fact that we do them. The pious pictures that permeate Facebook and Instagram. The recollection of deeds done that peppers my conversation. The expectation of your name in print because of what you did.

People still do very specific things, for this very specific reason: to be applauded by other people. Why? Because we want to justify ourselves (Luke 10:29), because we need the sense that we have done enough, because we want approval. This is a universal, inescapable human need.

The problem is how we try to meet that need. Maybe you think that you can give yourself that approval – that if you just tell yourself enough that you are enough then that will be enough. Or maybe you try to get that approval from others – that if you do enough to win the respect of enough then that will be enough. And maybe most days you can fool yourself into thinking that all of that is, in fact, enough.

But not today. Not on Ash Wednesday. Not when everything that all your goals and all your efforts and all your life will amount to is staring at you from inside that bowl. Those ashes are a brutal reminder of your mortality, and that mortality is a universal, inescapable human problem that makes it difficult for you to solve this other universal, inescapable human problem – this need for approval.

Because no matter how much recognition you get on earth, eventually it will come to an end. The pats on the back will stop. The rounds of applause will grow silent.

You can give to the needy with all the fanfare in the world. You can pray on the street corners. You can fast until you collapse. And maybe you will get all kinds of approval from all kinds of people, but that's all you get. As Jesus says here over and over again, "You have received your reward in full" (**6:2, 5, 16**). That's it.

You stored up what your heart treasures, but you kept it **"on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal" (6:19)**, where a chorus of mortals, who will die, give approval to you, another mortal, who will also die.

So what do we do? If we can't give ourselves enough approval or get enough approval from others, what do we do? Nothing. You can't do a thing. That bowl proves it. That bowl proves that your offenses are many in God's sight, that your sins testify against you, that your offenses are ever with you (Isaiah 59:12), and that for them you will die (Ezekiel 18:4).

Ever since God said to Adam, "Dust you are and to dust you will return" (Genesis 3:19), death has been part of the human experience; a universal, inescapable human problem, caused by our sin. That bowl in the front of church confronts you with the fact that you who are dust will return to dust (Psalm 90:3).

But there is a second bowl in front of us tonight. Maybe you didn't notice it; it is in the front of our church every week. It's the bowl that's in the baptismal font. You see, if these ashes are the curse, and if sin is the cause, then baptism is the cure.

In baptism that universal, inescapable death – the death that is waiting for you – *that death* is already died. Baptism means that Someone Else's death counts entirely as your own. Jesus carried your sin, suffered your hell and died your death. But he didn't stay dead, he rose from the dead!

And in baptism, God takes everything that Jesus did and makes it as if you had gone through it yourself. "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Romans 6:3-4).

Moreover, through that baptismal death and resurrection, God is more than just your God. No, "you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:26-27). So like Jesus says six times here, God is **"your Father in heaven" (6:1, 4, 6, 18)**, and your heavenly Father's approval is completely unconditional (Romans 11:6).

Stop trying to win approval from other people, just rely entirely on what God has done for you, because you've got it all: God's forgiveness, God's love, God's approval, the things without which nothing matters – they're already yours!

That is "an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade" (1 Peter 1:4), treasure stored up in heaven, **"where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal" (6:20)**. It will never end up in that bowl, it will never be relegated to the ash heap of history.

Now, when we do what Ash Wednesday is all about – when we repent – the death and resurrection that first happened at our baptism happens again, and over and over again: Because "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

When you repent, you confront your sin. And rather than minimize it or ignore it or excuse it, you own up to it. You admit that you do not deserve the approval that you so desperately need. Instead, you turn to Jesus, and Jesus alone for that approval.

Now we've come to **the heart of the matter**, your heart: **"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (6:21)**. No more acting, no more trying to convince the Lord and everybody else that you are somehow better than you actually are. A wholly humbled heart – a penitent heart – doesn't perform righteousness for recognition, but because you love your neighbor and because you love your unseen heavenly Father, **"who sees what is done in secret" (6:4, 6, 18)**.

Being baptized into Christ is the only permanent solution to that universal, inescapable human problem. Everything that Jesus did is made yours at the baptismal font. That is where God washed all your sins away (Titus 3:4-7), that is where God took his Holy Spirit and put it in your heart as a deposit (2 Corinthians 1:22), guaranteeing that even though you are destined for these ashes, these ashes are not your final destination (Ephesians 1:14). God's promises that out of your ashes you will rise and live again (Daniel 12:2). Happy Lent. Amen.