

Matthew 6:1-6.16-20

Ash Wednesday

February 20, 1996

When I grew up I was paid for what I did. Whether I mowed the lawn, baled hay, or sprayed a fence row to kill the trees and bushes I was an hourly employee. (Interestingly enough, doing dishes or ~~sweeping~~<sup>vacuuming</sup> the carpet - inside work, didn't count) I worked for my father or for his business. My reward was the check that I would cash.

But sometimes there was another reward altogether. Maybe I had done a particularly good job of cleaning the garage, or trimmed the grass around all the trees and fence posts in our yard. One time it was mowing the hay field without leaving a number of patches of standing hay. At these moments my reward came when my father returned home, for ~~dinner or supper.~~ I showed him what I had done, I saw his pleasure, his words expressed his delight in what I had done. My heart leaped in joy.

Be careful not to do your good works in public in order to attract attention. If you do, your Father in heaven will not reward you. So when you give to the poor, don't announce it with trumpet fanfare. This is what hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets in order to be praised by people. I can guarantee this truth: That will be their only reward. When you give to the poor, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Give your contributions privately. Your Father sees what you do in private. He will reward you.

They tell me that if I want this to be a congregation that gives well, that I should keep tabs on the giving. They tell me that I should take note of changes in giving, give a phone call when someone has stopped giving or has made a special gift. I refuse to do it. I refuse to even take a look at what you give. For if my notice and comment become a reward for you, maybe you would no longer give in order to give joy to God.

Everything Jesus says in our gospel tonight is a call to do what we do, for God. Giving to the poor, praying, fasting or denying ourselves might

be done to impress others: I can live my whole life as if what you think of me is most important. Then my whole life is an appearance, acting. That is what the word hypocrite means - actor. I pretended to be concerned about the poor when really I am concerned about your applause: I pretend to pray to God with deep sincerity and feeling when really I am think<sup>ing</sup> of you, what you think of my words. I pretend to deny myself, acting as if I am giving up things for God when really I am only trying to ~~impress~~<sup>impress</sup> you.

For me being an actor is a constant temptation, a sin that I commit over and over. I can forget all about God as I think about you. I can let you, my neighbors, be my reason for what I do. I can live as a practical atheist, as if God is not the reason, and source and center of my life.

Jesus reminds us that your life is not about appearances but about God. Your Father sees what you do in private. He will reward you.

If you and I give to the poor in order to do what is expected, we will figure out a decent percentage. We will check out what others are doing, peg our giving to doing our fair share. Kind of like me working for an hourly wage.

But if <sup>we</sup> know the joy that is in God when the hungry have enough to eat, then <sup>our</sup> giving is like my work done to bring my father pleasure. That was my reward. My father's pleasure.

When you grow in faith, and in giving, and in service and in praying, there is joy in heaven. God is worshipped and honored in you, and there is joy in heaven.

But if you seek to grow for your own sense of accomplishment, and give so that you can see smiles on the faces of those you have helped, or pray so that you will have more peace of mind, then as rewarding as these activities may be, there will be no joy in heaven.

No one told me to seek to please my father. I simply wanted to out of love.

So it is with you and God. God has poured out all of God's love on you in JEsus Christ. JEsus went to the cross for you. Jesus suffered there for you. JEsus gave his whole self in love for you.

I hope that you will do the same, give your whole self in love for him.

A final thought. Back when I was trimming around fence posts, and waiting for my father to get home, I was mostly thinking about me. My little deed of a couple hours work seemed so large to me. But I think I forgot that the one I loved worked six days a week, and long hours to provide for me. I did not thank him very often.

Whatever we are doing to bring joy to God, I hope we will ~~never~~<sup>NEVER</sup> stop thinking of all that God is doing to provide and care for us.