

In our Ash Wednesday Gospel in Matthew 6, we hear Jesus say these words: “*When you give to the needy...When you pray...When you fast.*” As the saying goes, “Two out of three ain’t bad.” Like all Christians, we give to the needy. Like all Christians, we pray. And like all Christians, at least the ones we know, we do not fast. Yet Jesus assumes that we do. “*When you give, when you pray, when you fast.*” Not if, but when.

The direction of giving to the needy is toward others. The direction of prayer is toward God. The direction of fasting is not toward others. Others should not even know if, and when, we fast. Nor is the direction of fasting toward God. We are not to fast in order to gain the approval of others or of God. The direction of fasting is toward ourself. The one who fasts does not do it for others, nor for God, but only for his own benefit.

Lent has arrived, and with its arrival there comes the season of fasting. “I’m giving up chocolate for Lent.” “I’m giving up all sweets!” “I’m giving up alcohol!” Fine. Except for the fact that such fasting appears to be done solely for the sake of telling others about it. When Jesus entered the wilderness and fasted forty days, He did not first broadcast for all to hear, “I’m giving up everything for Lent!” Jesus fasted for our sake because we, with Adam and Eve in the Garden, refused to fast when the Serpent said: “Eat!”

In First Corinthians, the Apostle writes: “*Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.*” He is speaking of food offered to idols, and not fasting during Lent. However, it would be beneficial for us to consider these words. If we never fast, and I am not just speaking of food, but of all of life’s pleasures – if we never deprive our bodies of what we want, food or otherwise, have we not made our bodies into idols? Have we trained ourselves in such a way that we refuse to deny ourselves, be it food or whatever?

Now when we fast, we are not better for it. To deprive ourselves of food, or anything that we truly desire, does not bring out our best qualities. It does not make us friendlier, happier, or stronger. Rather, it exposes our true nature, that we are weak, and empty, broken vessels. So, what’s the point of fasting? And why does Jesus assume His disciples do it?

The devil tempts us with earthly pleasures. He tempts us with what we want for our bodies, but not with what we need for our souls. Something as simple as a brief fast to pray before we eat a meal is disciplining ourselves to put our soul’s needs ahead of what God gives us for our bodies. Fasting during Lent, or before Holy Communion, helps us to focus on what our Lord did for us on the cross, and gives to us in the Sacrament, rather than on all of life’s pleasures.

If you fast, or do not fast, do not tell me or anyone else. Do not think you are more of a Christian if you do fast, or less of a Christian if you do not fast. But should you decide to fast, do it for your own benefit. Rather than consuming a meal, use that time to read your Bible and pray. Even fasting one meal a week during Lent in this way, the benefit you gain will be great for your soul.

*“When you give to the needy...When you pray...When you fast.”* Whether or not these describe you, these do describe your Lord. You are the needy, broken, and empty vessel He chose to love and to serve with all that He is and has. Jesus gave Himself up for you completely on the cross. And in the bread and wine on the altar, He gives all this to you.

When He prays, He prays for you, for your needs, for your forgiveness. And His Father listens to Him. He does forgive you according to Jesus’ prayer.

And Jesus fasted, depriving Himself completely of life’s pleasures so that you would be given all the pleasures of heaven.

On this Ash Wednesday evening, we are all here as empty and broken sinners gathered together. There is no one here tonight who should not be here. No one here too empty, and too broken, for Jesus to heal. No one too sinful for Him to forgive.

We enter into Lent together because we are poor, broken sinners. But our eyes are on Jesus. He went to the cross for sinners just like us. Tonight, throughout Lent, and yes, through our entire life, we repent of the sinners that we are, of our sin that put Jesus on His cross.

But the final word on this Ash Wednesday is not our sin, nor our dust and ashes. It is Jesus. It is the forgiveness of your sins in His blood shed for you, for all of you. Amen.