

When nothing matches (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21)

It's easy to read this passage and assume it has nothing to do with us.

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As a college student, I was a rather expert procrastinator. (To thwart the chuckles of my family, friends, and editors, this is not entirely a trait that I have overcome.)

I preferred to use daylight hours to see friends, wander campus, or spend hours with a cup of coffee and a book. All of which meant that papers and projects didn't always get done during waking hours (or in any of the weeks leading up to a due date), and an epic all-nighter would ensue.

The next day in class you could usually tell who else had fallen prey to the all-nighter; general fatigue is a prevalent scent on a college campus, but those who have been up all night exude a special kind of exhaustion.

I would also make sure that I at least showered and wore something to class that didn't resemble pajamas. I often even went so far as to put on make-up with special care. But inside? Truly my whole being ached with exhaustion, but I maintained that I was awake! Alert! Enthusiastic, even.

Inevitably, despite my best attempts to appear put together, something was still askew. I'd end up wearing two different socks. My backpack would come unzipped halfway across campus. Another commitment would slip my mind. I couldn't hide the ways in which I was falling apart, no matter how hard I tried.

The danger of hearing this Gospel reading on Ash Wednesday is that, for the most part, we don't do the things it describes. We hear this scripture and feel utter relief that it doesn't apply to us at all.

We don't flaunt our piety, and we rarely broadcast our attempts at holiness. We might pray in the occasional restaurant, but we keep it short and sweet, if not entirely silent. We don't make a production of putting our offering in the plate; many of us in fact go to great lengths to keep our giving secret.

I mean, sure, Jesus—it's a nice reading, but perhaps we could focus on something a little more relevant?

After all, I didn't complain loudly that I had been up all night. I didn't hope for sympathy or admiration, and I don't think I fell asleep in the back of the classroom.

But nothing matched, and I don't just mean my socks. My insides didn't match my outsides. My intent to make everything seem OK, bordering on perfect even, was nothing more than a front that disappeared as soon as there was a quiet moment in the library.

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus assumes that those listening to him are praying and fasting and giving an offering, but he seems to think that some folks have their intentions and motivations in the wrong place. Perhaps he wonders if their offerings are done not in thanksgiving for all that God has done in their lives but so that everyone might know how much money they have. Maybe it seems that their prayers are spoken not from a clean heart but as a holy spackle job, a cover-up.

It's hard to fake it when your backpack comes apart or your shoes don't match. It's even harder to fake it when you've got a large smudgy cross on your forehead.

But faking it isn't what we're called to do. We can't fake our life or hide what's really going on or pretty it up—at least not for very long, and definitely not with God.

We can't fake it or hide it because God wants it all: our exhaustion, our falling-apart lives, our shattered dreams, our attempts (and failures) at a spiritual discipline, our efforts to pray every day, our miserable attempts to cover up cracks and brokenness that we'd rather everyone not see.

God claims all of us and every part of us. God marks us with the cross of Christ forever.

In baptism that cross that claims you gets traced on your forehead with a thumb, maybe a little oil.

On Ash Wednesday it's a big, smudgy cross, not hiding or faking anything but bold for the world to see that you have been claimed, you have been marked, you are God's, you are dust and to dust you shall return: broken and whole, exhausted and rested, troubled and at peace.