

February 22, Ash Wednesday (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21)

Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return. But my sermons!

by [Kathryn Z. Johnston](#) in the [February 2023](#) issue

As I sit at my desk and write this, I have to laugh at the irony. This passage from Matthew is presumably about humility and doing things for the right reason. Practice your piety, but do it so that it is part of your relationship with God. No one else needs to know about it. Keep your piety checklist to yourself.

But to my right on my desk is a semipermanent reminder sheet titled “Publicity Checklist.” The members and friends of the church I serve receive their news about upcoming events in a variety of formats: bulletin insert, announcements during services, printed newsletter, email newsletter, social media, video, slides, website.

Contrary to Matthew’s admonition, that’s a lot of effort to make sure all that we do is not a secret. At the very least, when someone asks me why they had not heard about an event, I want my reward to be the ability to say the phrase that will be found on my tombstone: “It was in the bulletin.”

In this passage the publicity checklist includes sounding trumpets, praying at the street corner, and looking dismal while fasting. Apparently, it was these things that pointed to the participant’s worth, not according to God but according to the community.

Where do we find our worth?

If I take this question seriously, I have some explaining to do. Of course, I find my worth in being a beloved child of God. But also in being the parent of a high school senior who is about to launch into his “what’s next,” and in being a loving spouse and a dependable life partner. In the sermons I preach, the liturgies I put together, and yes, fine, in the slides and the articles and the emails I check off the list.

Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return. But my family! My sermons! My checklists!

Truth is, I do not ask for trumpets when I pay my offering. I do not make sure others are looking when I am in private prayer. I flat-out do not fast.

But I do lose sight of why I do the things I do. I forget that my worth comes from who and whose I am.

A friend of our family lived in an expensive gated community. She raised her children with the other families in the neighborhood. There were outings and travel teams and get-togethers. Every year there was a block party with a large cover fee where steak and lobster and expensive bottles of wine were served.

When her husband died, personal money mismanagement came to light, and she had to sell the house and leave the community. In an attempt to keep at least one thing the same from her previous life, she saved her money to pay the cover fee for the annual steak-and-lobster block party. Other neighbors who had moved away always came back for it, so why should she be any different?

But to her great disappointment, she was no longer welcome. She had the money, but her neighbors—her former friends—no longer saw her worth. *Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return.* But my money!

I am blessed to know some amazing living saints of the church. Wayne is of undetermined age, but we do know that there are grandparents in our congregation who had Wayne as their confirmation class teacher. He still pops in occasionally to talk to the confirmation class. He comes to the session meeting when they join the church. He gives the youth a pep talk before Youth Sunday, reminding them who loves them, reminding them of their worth.

He is a pillar not just of our faith community but of other communities of faith. In his younger days, he helped start a new church that grew into three more churches (all of them still exist) before a move brought him to us.

The pastors of these communities got together and decided to honor Wayne. Some preliminary plans were made, and I was tasked with introducing the idea to him. It went about as well as you might expect.

“Absolutely not.” And he quoted, “Beware of your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” And that was that.

It is easy to get caught up in the checklists of all we do and to fall into the trap of seeking earthly kingdom value and worth. It is human nature to want some credit for those things.

Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return. Our worth comes from God.