

Ashes together (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21)

Praying in community is often more powerful than praying “in secret.”

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When I'm working on my laptop I usually use a Bible website instead of opening a print Bible, exposing me to newer translations than those I've had in my house or office for decades. I was horrified when reading this Ash Wednesday passage from Matthew to realize that one such translation replaces the word “dismal” with “somber” when Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, advises people how not to act when fasting. I then compared all the English translations and realized most translations don't use “dismal.” This threw me, because “dismal” has long been key to my understanding of this passage, as well as how I have preached it for some 17 years.

Ash Wednesday has long been one of my favorite days in the church year, but I have never seen it as dismal. Not even in 2021 in the Episcopal diocese of Southern Virginia, when per our bishop we weren't permitted to have any in-person Ash Wednesday services at all. Instead of holding two or three services and then taking ashes to people in hospital rooms and nursing homes who couldn't make it to church, I preached just once to a mostly empty church and a camera.

I explained to my parishioners over their screens how they could impose ashes on themselves, ashes in tiny plastic packages we had distributed three days before at

an outdoor drive-up event. They were left over from previous years when we had burned palms from Sunday. They hadn't been mixed with oil, so they were still usable. Interesting that these old ashes were lasting, since my job that day was to tell people they would fade away like ashes.

Many who were tuning in, however, had not come to our drive-up "collect your ashes" event. I assured them they could use dirt, fireplace ashes, clean kitty litter, or break up the tip of a pencil. I advised against using printer toner: one year we'd had to buy ashes due to snow preventing our usual burning of the palms, and I still think we were sold printer toner. We were marked for days.

That online Ash Wednesday, it felt like we were being forced, for the second time, to give up church for Lent. Sermons on this first day of Lent sometimes focus on Lenten disciplines that Jesus talks about in the Sermon of the Mount, such as fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, encouraging us not to draw attention to ourselves when we do so. No danger of that when everyone in my congregation was at home imposing ashes on themselves shortly before going to bed—no one was going to dismally walk around the grocery store with a smudge on their head. One parishioner sent me a photo of her young sons holding up their bangs to show the ashes on their foreheads as well as on the dog's head, which didn't look dismal at all

I love "dismal" because it sounds overdramatic—when I read this passage in church it's hard not to drag out or exaggerate the first syllable of "dismal." The word sounds like something ridiculous that of course we Christians do not want to embody when fasting. But "somber," the newer translation and one that many translations use: I find myself bristling against that interpretation. Somber, like sober, seems to me an *appropriate* Ash Wednesday affect.

Jesus warns against blowing a trumpet when giving funds to the poor. I think of this admonition when I see names of donors listed in various tiers of givers to seminaries or symphonies. Fundraising literature uplifts such practices. When I notice names on hospitals wings, I wonder whether the name was picked because the person was beloved or a particularly large giver.

While warning against praying loudly in public, the Ash Wednesday reading skips Jesus telling those gathered how to pray via the Lord's Prayer, an odd omission for such a holy day. We hear about praying in secret and then skip right over this prayer that many of us pray in unison every time we are gathered together in church.

Praying in community has always been more powerful for me than praying “in secret.”

The hardest part of imposing ashes on myself in front of a camera was not hearing that I would return to dust in someone else’s voice, and to feel someone else’s finger on my forehead. Other than that day, whenever I’ve led Ash Wednesday services I have always asked someone in the congregation to impose ashes on me. Sometimes they hesitate, and sometimes their voice quivers as they whisper the words to me. I’m unfailingly grateful and moved.

This particular reading ends with a reminder that treasures on earth will turn to rust or become stolen, and to set our hearts on non-earthly things. Ashes are a powerful reminder of this.