

In this Ash Wednesday Gospel, Jesus addresses three different topics: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. These three practices were central to Jewish life during the Second Temple period in Palestine, when Jesus lived. They were often demonstrated publicly: almsgiving of the first century was often done in a parade, with a crier and musicians, announcing the name of the the almsgiver and playing a fanfare. The almsgiver followed behind, donating money to those who came with open hands. It was similar with prayer: in Jesus' day, Jewish prayer, especially at the Temple, was a very loud, demonstrative and public act. It was important not just to pray, but to be seen by others while you were praying. And lastly, in Jesus' day, all who fasted wore sackcloth and ashes, reenacting the mourning scenes from the Hebrew Bible: Jacob, David, Job, and throughout the prophets, the wearing of sackcloth enacts mourning and penitence and makes them real.

Over and against these practices, in today's Gospel, Jesus seems to give us a different command: "your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you," "go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your

Father who sees in secret will reward you.” and “your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” There’s a deep theme uniting these practices: do these things in secret, and God will know. For years, I took these passages to be promoting an essential humility and privacy: Jesus is telling us that our religious observance is between us and God. He is saying, “don’t go showboating, don’t be ostentatious. Be simple. Be private. Be secret. This will make you different, and mark you as my followers.” // I thought this was a historical example, one locked in the time of the first century, and that much had changed since then. // I imagine that many of you may read the passage in this way.

This reading worked just fine for me, until my friend and colleague at HDS, Ryan Adams, offered a different interpretation. Despite what you might guess from the sound of his name, Ryan Adams is a devout Jew. And one day we were discussing the public nature of religious practice. He cited this passage, and he said something like this, “You know, we still do it this way. When Jews donate, they often do it publicly. Think about it, all those hospitals,

universities, non-profit social service agencies... all of them feature buildings, wings, and rooms that are named after donors, and everyone who walks in sees that name.

And we still pray loudly and in public. You've seen the pictures of the Wailing Wall, or prayer at a synagogue, where people are shokeling, - which is the Yiddish word for the holy bobbing and swaying from side to side. And we still wear black when we are fasting, so everyone knows we are observing. But this passage makes this sound like those **were and are bad** things to do. I don't get it. Here's what this passage gets wrong: Jews, at least Jews now, don't do these things for ourselves. When done right, it's not about our egos. We do these things for the community, we do them to spur each other on to give more, we do them to observe the Law more carefully, we do them to acknowledge that God is among the people. /// Reading this passage, you might think that God **lived** in that closet and that the closet was the **only** place in which God could be found."

As we enter into Lent this day, I invite you to think about whether you are "going it alone." Are you praying in the closet, or are

you seeking God among the people? Each Lent is different, each Lent presents its own challenges, each Lent unveils its own surprises. And there isn't a clear right or wrong here. But I wonder about how isolating penitence and introspection can be. I wonder about how daunted we can feel as we choose Isaiah's fast of loosing the bonds of injustice, undoing the thongs of the yoke, letting the oppressed go free...only to feel hopeless at the enormity of those tasks.

I wonder about how pervasive our separateness can be in contemporary America: as extremely privileged people, we have our own phones, tvs, Facebook pages, websites...everything is designed to be individualized and exclusivized: made your way. I wonder if making Lent a private, secret affair might further separate us, sending us to our quiet rooms rather than into the arms of God in our midst. It reminds me of the old African proverb: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." Perhaps this Lent offers us a chance to go far, deep into the heart of the mystery of God.

We can still follow Jesus' commands to pray secretly, but we should also embrace the call of Isaiah, which is a call to a **people**. I invite you to consider journeying through Lent as one of many, as a

community, as friends taking the long hard road to the Passion of our Lord. Though the cold bleakness of this season is framed by snow walls so high that we cannot yet glimpse the glory of the Resurrection, we can still follow the path to Holy Week together, leaning on each other for stability, warmth, and comfort. The more who join in the journey, the farther we will go. Amen.