

CLOSET CHRISTIANS

Tonight, is Ash Wednesday. This holy day marks the beginning of the Lenten season. We begin the Lenten season tonight, which marks the march toward the crucifixion. The crucifixion, of course, is the event that saves us from the consequences of our sins. We mark the beginning of this season with a self-admission. We begin by admitting that we, ourselves are sinners.

Now, this self-admission is not anything new for us. The confession that we are all sinners is a cornerstone of our faith. However, beyond a tacit admission, I bet most of us never give it much thought. Today, on Ash Wednesday, we focus on it specifically; we focus on the reality of our sin.

Why do we do it in this way? Why do we do it with the mark of these ashes? Well, in the old Testament when a person was doing penance for their sins, they would dress in sackcloth. Then they would sit in ashes and sprinkle those ashes on their heads. It was a sign that showed that a person not only acknowledged their sinfulness, but also acknowledged the effect that sin had on their lives. It was a visible sign of the wretched condition of sinfulness. By adopting this practice, a person showed true contrition.

In fact, this practice was a sign of mourning. It signified that a person had died because the wages of sin are death. When the Christian church adopted this practice, we did it to set the tone of Lent. We begin Lent by mourning. Theologically speaking we're not mourning just Jesus' death- we're mourning our own death. It's a death we've earned through our own sin.

But that brings up a question. What is sin? How can we say that we are sinners if we don't even know what sin is? If you look it up in the dictionary it says this- sin is an immoral act considered to be a transgression against divine law, an act regarded as a serious or regrettable fault, offense or omission. So, we think that sin means something shocking- something scandalous. The thing is that sin is often much more subtle than that. Often times it's so subtle that we aren't even conscious of our own sin.

Many of our great theologians have said the greatest sin is pride. If so, then this is a means of debasing ourselves. It's hard to be prideful when you're dressed in burlap. It's hard to be prideful when you're dirty. So, this act is important because of the message it sends. Through this practice, we're placing the focus on the grace of God rather than on ourselves- on our own honor and glory.

That's something that I believe is so needed in our world today. It's the exact opposite of what our culture says. Our culture teaches us to focus on ourselves- to show off ourselves like peacocks. It teaches us to make something of ourselves- to make a name for ourselves. It teaches us to seek our own fortunes and to look out for number one. We forget when we do that that God is number one.

Jesus came to offer a different message. He said in the passage we just read (I'm paraphrasing, I'm not saying it exactly), "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise, you have no reward with your father who is in heaven. Give in secret. Pray in secret." In other words, don't draw attention to yourselves.

For the Christian the greatest goal should be to be "in the closet". That phrase has taken on some unfortunate implications over the years, but I'm not trying to take you that direction at all. What I mean by being "in the closet", is that instead of drawing attention to ourselves and our own wants and needs, we should constantly be drawing attention to God and to Jesus Christ. That should be where we are pointing. That should be the source of our pride. It's not, "Look at what I have done!" but rather, "Look at what our Lord Jesus has done!" That's what's important. We're drawing attention to the God who saves us.

Now I'll be the first to admit, this isn't easy to do. Speaking for myself I'm proud of the things I've accomplished. I want to draw attention to them. But it's important to point out, though, that I wouldn't have accomplished any of them without the blessing of Jesus Christ. Whatever I've achieved, I've achieved through his grace.

But, you know, there's an even deeper problem. By focusing on myself, I may be calling upon people, without realizing it, to pay more homage to me than to the God who created me. That's never a good thing. Without God, we are nothing.

My favorite movie is Braveheart. There's a scene in Braveheart where William Wallace is meeting the Princess of Wales for the first time, and she says to him, "I understand that you have recently been given the rank of knight." He says to her, "I have been given nothing. God makes men what they are."

God made me what I am. God made you what you are. You are something beautiful because God made you that way. I mean that for each one of you. Without God we are nothing.

There's a contextual component to this passage, and we shouldn't lose sight of it. A good servant would never call more attention to themselves than to their master. To do so would be to dishonor the master. If I'm truly God's servant, Jesus should come first with me- always- in every single circumstance.

So, for all these reasons I don ashes tonight. I don them in acknowledgement and confession of the sins I know I committed. That includes sins that I may have committed against any of you. I don them also in acknowledgement and confession of the sins I committed without realizing I committed them. I acknowledge the sins I committed yesterday, and the sins I will surely commit tomorrow.

At the same time, I don these ashes with pride because I thank God that, while I wear ashes here on earth, I will receive a crown of glory in heaven. I will not inherit that crown because I have earned it, but because my master has grace enough and mercy enough to grant it to me. Tonight, I admit my sins, and I reserve the glory for Jesus Christ, whose name is above every name. I proudly wear these ashes, so that I can display his glory through his grace that washes me clean. Tonight, I'm a closet Christian, and I pray that you will be as well.