

A Holy Lent: Holy Habits  
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 & Joel 2:12-17  
February 18, 2024  
First Presbyterian, Luling

You might remember that this past Advent, we thought together about a Holy Advent: holy keeping, holy pondering, holy seeing. We talked then about carrying that theme through into Lent, Advent's companion season. Both are seasons of repentance and preparation. Advent a preparation for Christmas, of course. And Lent a preparation for Holy Week and Easter. Lent is more clearly a season of repentance. It begins on Ash Wednesday, and here are the Book of Common Worship words about Ash Wednesday:

Beloved people of God: every year at the time of the Christian Passover we celebrate our redemption through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Lent is a time to prepare for this celebration and to renew our life in the paschal (Easter) mystery. We begin this holy season by acknowledging our need for repentance, and for the mercy and forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And then here's what it says about how we observe Lent: I invite you, therefore, in the name of Christ, to observe a holy Lent by self-examination and penitence, by prayer and fasting, by works of love, and by meditating on God's word.

A holy Lent, then, is marked by attitude as well as action. Much like the keeping, pondering, and seeing of Advent, we perform certain actions that might be ordinary, but are made holy by the object of those actions, by God. Lent is popularly understood as a time to give something up. We could also look it as a time to establish holy habits.

The habits, or practices, that the Ash Wednesday service names are the classic spiritual disciplines that Christians have turned to for centuries. Self-examination and penitence, prayer and fasting, works of love, meditating on God's word. Those are the classics because it's a clear line from scripture to those practices. Both of our readings today reference several of these holy habits.

First, the Joel passage that Beth read. It speaks clearly about both the inner orientation and the outward behaviors, attitude and action. "Return to me, says the Lord, with all your heart." There's the inner orientation. "With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning." There is the practice of fasting. "Rend your hearts and not your clothing." The inner orientation, repentance toward God, and outward behavior, are to match. This repentance is not strictly individual, either. Joel directs the people to gather everyone together for these acts of penitence, for these habits. Old and young, newly married, and priests. The holy habits, for Joel and many of the prophets, are for a purpose. The purpose of the holy habits are to express an inner repentance and a re-orientation toward right worship of God and right treatment of neighbor. The habits of repentance and fasting are not self-improvement efforts, but directed toward God.

Jesus makes much the same point, only more clearly, in Matthew. In the process, he alludes to several other holy habits. He kind of takes for granted that the disciples and other

listeners are already doing these spiritual practices, and he just wants to make sure that they're doing them with right motivation and right orientation.

Listen to all of the holy habits Jesus references. He calls them in that first verse, "practicing your piety" or really "your righteousness." And he warns them not to practice holy habits in order to impress other people.

He talks about giving alms, or charity. He talks about prayer, both the context and content. He talks about fasting. Almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. These are definitely the classic spiritual disciplines. Jesus is pretty clear about how we are to do these things, and how we are not to do these things. Giving alms: do it privately, secretly, not so others know about it. Prayer: do it in private, not on the street corner. And don't make it long and flowery. This is where he gives them the example prayer that we know as the Lord's prayer. And fasting: don't look terrible about it, try to make sure no one can tell that you're fasting.

Maybe I'm revealing more about myself than I need to, but I don't think Presbyterians are particularly tempted toward public exhibition of righteousness and piety. We aren't apt to go around town making sure everyone knows where we're giving our money, or how much and how well we're praying, or that we're fasting. We're more private than that about our faith and about our holy habits. So we may think ourselves exempt from Jesus's warning here. His warning is not to practice holy habits for the benefit of our own reputations, but for God alone. The temptation remains, though, to practice holy habits for our own self-congratulation. What a good and faithful Christian we are, because we give to the poor and pray and fast. Even if within the privacy of our own heart, if we're doing these habits for our own benefit, then they are not holy habits. We're to do them for an audience of one: God alone.

For example, if we decide to fast from desserts for Lent, and we think to ourselves, "oh good, maybe I'll drop those five pounds in the process," then our fasting is, at least in part, directed toward ourselves, not toward God. That's the easiest example to see, but our holy habits are not primarily to make us more holy, but because they are oriented toward a holy God.

Holy Habits then, in a Holy Lent, must be directed toward a holy God. Our inner orientation must be toward God, and our inner attitude must match our outward behavior.

It's never too late to add a holy habit for Lent. I saw this week these suggestions, attributed to Pope Francis, and I'll close with them.

- Fast from hurting words and say kind words
- Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude
- Fast from anger and be filled with patience
- Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope
- Fast from worries and have trust in God
- Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity
- Fast from pressures and be prayerful
- Fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy
- Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others
- Fast from grudges and be reconciled

- Fast from words and be silent so you can listen