

Ash Wednesday, March 1, 2017  
Hope Central Church  
Year A, Matthew 6:1-21  
The Rev. Courtney Jones

This is a pretty ironic Gospel reading for a day when we literally walk around with our faith on our foreheads. Fasting is one of the most ancient spiritual practices we know. In the ancient world, often prophets would go into the wilderness and fast for days or weeks before emerging with their visions. Of course, limiting their water intake and then eating wild plants and mushrooms might have enhanced their visions, but that's another story. Jesus, a prophet in his own rite, knew about the ways fasting called us to deeper trust in God.

There are all kinds of ways to go deeper in our spiritual lives, we know. We pray, we sing, we create, we protest, we donate to organizations doing the work of peace with justice. We see God when we know how connected we are to the world God created, when we know our liberation is dependent on the liberation of another. And it is with this in mind that we have chosen mercy as our Lenten theme. Historically, Lent is a time to give something up or take something on such that we become more attuned to the grace of the Spirit in our lives. This year, as part of our mercy theme, we are invited as a congregation (if we are willing and able) to participate in a meat-free Lent, to take on an Orthodox vegan fast. This is about having mercy for animals and also having mercy for our planet, a stand against destruction agribusiness wreaks on our ecosystem. Of course, we are also called to have mercy on ourselves and to choose the fast that is ours, understanding that there are budget and health constraints that might prevent us from stepping fully and suddenly into a meat-free Lent, and understanding that we have sometimes been fully present to the suffering of animals while being blind to the suffering of humans. We want to be a people who adopt mercy as a way of being, with humans, animals, plants, and our fragile planet.

In Christian tradition, works of mercy are a means of grace, a way in which we participate in God's ongoing work in the world. United Methodism and Roman Catholicism both enumerate specific works of mercy in their official doctrines. In the Catholic tradition, some of the corporal (or bodily) works of mercy are: feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick and/or the imprisoned, burying the dead. Some of the spiritual works of mercy are: counseling the doubtful, forgiving offenses, consoling the afflicted, and praying for the living and the dead. In Methodism, there are five works of mercy: doing good, visiting the sick and prisoners, feeding and clothing people, earning/saving/and giving all we can, and opposition to slavery. From these understandings of works of mercy, Laura Ruth and I came up with an act of mercy for each day of Lent—the calendar is in your bulletin, I believe. But even more broadly than these works of mercy, Terry Steeden, our Greek scholar in residence, taught the worship planning team an even more ancient way of understanding mercy as we were preparing for this theme. He told us that in the early church, they understood mercy this way: someone has a need, and another has a resource with which to meet that need. That, ultimately, is the work we are attempting this Lent. We are developing a practice of understanding what our resources are and

putting ourselves in places where those resources can be best utilized—not for our own glory but for the sake of a Love that can repair the world.

We can extend mercy as a spiritual practice in several spheres: the interpersonal, the institutional, the systemic, and even the intrapersonal. Interpersonally, it's probably pretty easy to understand what mercy might look like: doing the dishes even if it's not your turn because your partner is sick or exhausted. Doing a favor for a friend because they need it and you have time and capacity. Visiting someone who is homebound because they just had surgery.

What might institutional mercy look like? The forgiveness of a debt, or donating surplus income to a nonprofit, perhaps. A church voting to be Open and Affirming for LGBTQ people who have historically felt disenfranchised from the church and who long for finding sanctuary. Restaurants paying living wages to their tip workers rather than \$3 an hour and then expecting employees to rely on tips to make up the difference.

Systemic mercy, that's a little harder. I think every breaking open of consciousness about the connection between white supremacy and the prison industrial complex is a move in the direction of mercy. True mercy might only be achieved when we actually pass meaningful prison reform, but for us, for this season, learning more so we can do better by our incarcerated neighbors, who are also the body of Christ, might be a next step. Systemic mercy might look like better immigration policy that keeps families together in lieu of a wall—an extension of compassion, kindness, and welcome to our neighbors from around the world rather than a symbol that says “you're not welcome here.”

And then there's intrapersonal mercy, the mercy cycle within ourselves. That's where this practice must begin. If we are not compassionate, kind, merciful with ourselves, we cannot extend it to others. In order to meet a need, we must have the resources. If we spend our time berating ourselves for having wants and needs (guilty!), or if we belittle ourselves because we don't think we will be worthy of such compassion until we are smarter/prettier/more successful/whathaveyou, then there is no room in our minds to notice opportunities for mercy, and there is no room in our hearts to find the compassion that moves us to mercy. We must find within the heart of God the mercy we seek, turning to God for the resources to meet our own spiritual needs, so that we can then utilize our own resources in showing mercy to others.

Jesus asks us to be quiet about our generosity, to be private in our prayers, to be joyful in our fasting. We dot our foreheads with ash not because we are pious, but because we need to be reminded that we are human—created from the breath of God and the dust of the earth. Similarly, practicing mercy and cultivating our capacity for mercy is not for the purpose of our own egos. It is, ultimately, an opportunity to practice humility, to be right-sized. We offer mercy and challenge those who have power to change oppressive systems to show mercy because this is the work to which Jesus calls us. And Jesus calls us to this work because it not only puts us in the center of Divine Mercy but also in the center of our common humanity. We remember our humanity on Ash Wednesday, and doing so necessarily puts us in touch with the humanity of others. We are reminded that we offer mercy because we need mercy. We call upon the powerful to show mercy because at some point, we or those we love have been at the mercy of oppressive systems.

This ironic passage helps clarify the juxtapositions and contradictions of the life of faith: the ashes on our foreheads or hands remind us of our human frailty, of our finitude and our limitations. They remind us that because our lives are fleeting, and our lives are interconnected, everything we do impacts others. Then there's Jesus, asking us to be deeply connected to God through spiritual practice, but quietly, privately, in that place where ego falls away and our highest self emerges—a place in which we are expansive and infinite. The delicate balance of our Lenten journey of mercy is to keep our humanity in view and to remember the power and privilege we wield while staying connected to God, the source of our truest power. It's the challenge of staying right-sized without lording over others even when we are trying to be benevolent. It's the challenge of realizing that sometimes we intend to offer mercy and our impact is anything but. It's the challenge of offering the mercy, kindness, compassion that is ours to offer knowing that we have no power over whether or not our best gestures are accepted. It's a risk, it's vulnerable, even if we are the one with power—and thus the necessity of fasting, of praying, of tapping into our spiritual practices that help us risk vulnerability again and again for the sake of beloved community.

As we move into the journey of Lent, the journey toward the drama of Holy Week, the journey of mercy, I want to offer that this passage wouldn't really be as powerful without the final few lines: wherever your treasure is, there your heart will be also. We give up something that keeps us from our spiritual lives (electronic gadgets, or excess food, or alcohol, or foul language, or gossip), and we practice mercy—or grace, or compassion, or love, or forgiveness—because we long to be present to God's mercy in our lives, because we long to be the people God is calling us to be. We long to store up spiritual treasure, or spiritual fortitude, to exercise our spiritual muscles, because when the trappings of our lives are stripped away, we are left with our common, dusty, God-kissed humanity. And it is in THAT place where God can be seen and experienced most plainly. That is the place from which we long to be good neighbors, to be good stewards of our planet, to live out God's love, peace, and justice in bold ways. This is my prayer for us as we observe our Lenten practices—that even in the challenge we find the joy of being useful, and that we find our treasure is all Love. After all, from dust and love we came, and to dust and love we shall return.