

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
Ash Wednesday, March 9, 2011
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme-Time to Get Right with God

Psalm 51:1–17, 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10; Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

The following story begins the first chapter of Jeffrey K. Salkin's book, *Being God's Partner*. (Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994)

“While walking in a neighboring village late at night, a Hasidic rebbe (rabbi) met a man who was also walking alone. For a while, the two walked in silence. Finally, the rebbe turned to the man and asked, ‘So, who do you work for?’”

“‘I work for the village,’ the man answered. ‘I’m the night watchman.’”

“They walked in silence again. Finally, the night watchman asked the rebbe, ‘And who do you work for?’”

“The rebbe answered, ‘I’m not always sure. But this I will tell you. Name your present salary and I will double it. All you have to do is walk with me and ask me, from time to time, ‘Who do you work for?’”

A pastor, Schuyler Rhodes writes, “On this Ash Wednesday it is perhaps good for us to pause and ask the question, “Who do we work for?” This time of penitence reminds us that we have competing and oftentimes contradictory loyalties. The demands of the workplace, the marketplace, the school, the community, the home pull us away from our commitments to God. The voices of others hold our attention more firmly than the voice of God. We know that this should not be so, but we feel powerless to live any other way.”

“Ash Wednesday calls us to acknowledge our failure to remember the one for whom we truly work. It calls us to imagine a different way of being -- a life organized differently. It offers us the assurance of forgiveness and the hopefulness of a deeper commitment. Ash Wednesday invites us to engage in a journey of reflection, a time to get right with God -- a journey that ends at an empty tomb where we exchange our shawls of mourning for towels of service.” “Emphasis” March 9, 2011

To help guide us on this Lenten journey of reflection, a time to get right with God, and to remember for whom we work we have teachings from Jesus and Paul.

Jesus taught that prayer, sacrificial giving and fasting, a part of our Lenten journey in modern times, are vital ways to get right with God. They are ways to store up treasures in heaven or in other words, build a strong relationship with God.

Unfortunately, in the time of Jesus, there were people who made this time of getting right with the great God of mercy, love and forgiveness a show of how great “they” were in showing off their “humility.” The way they prayed aloud in public, dressed down to the extreme, made themselves look pale and sad, threw their less than “sacrificial coins” loudly into the brass trumpet shaped offering receptacle in front of the Temple in Jerusalem all said: “Look! Look! No one is more righteous before God than me.” The greatest deception was that they thought all this gave them greater standing or righteousness before God. In truth, it was all about them and not God. They also thought their attitudes and actions would make them famous as well as righteous. By

investing so much in their own ego they were storing up treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal. In the end, they would have nothing and be nothing before God. People who observed their behavior would remember them all right—as self-centered show offs who were all about themselves. Jesus was teaching people then and today that such attitudes and behavior are only self-defeating and a negative witness about God.

However according to Matthew, what Jesus wanted people then and today to do in prayer, sacrificial giving and fasting as a time to get right with God are the following:

“A follower of Jesus demonstrates generosity -- a desire and willingness to share the bounty of one's life with those whose needs exceed their resources. Both desire and willingness are important. One may have willingness toward generosity, but no deep desire. The result is a grudging gift. Another may have a desire to be benevolent, but be unwilling to give practical expression to that desire. The result is a divided heart. Matthew encourages generosity, but a generosity that focuses on the need, not the public relations,” that might come from it.

“A follower of Jesus is also one who engages in serious prayer. Some might argue that all prayer is serious, but I am not sure that Matthew would be among their number. Serious prayer focuses more on feelings than thoughts, more on genuine expression than a well-turned phrase, more on immediate concerns than formulaic repetitions, more on seeking God's presence than seeking the approval of others. For Matthew, prayer is essentially a private communication between the believer and God carried out in the intimacy of one's relationship with the divine.”

“A follower of Jesus is one whose fast is a joy. The reason for fasting is not primarily or even essentially deprivation. The deprivation is a means to an end and that end is a deeper fellowship with God. Therefore, the external affect of fasting is not the long face of hunger, but rather the joyful countenance of being filled” and cleansed by God. Quotes from “Emphasis,” March 9, 2011

And finally, according to Paul, in this Christ-like journey of getting right with God, we discover that because of what Jesus Christ has done for us, God has already made us right with him. We cannot earn this relationship. It is a gift of God. God has taken the first steps to reconcile us to him in a way that moths and rust cannot consume and where thieves cannot break in and steal. Any sacrificial giving, prayer, and fasting we do are in response to this everlasting grace of God. The style in which we give, pray and fast are to point others to this God of salvation. Our words, attitudes and behavior, even if they result in the suffering Paul went through as described in II Corinthians, are to be lived as Christ's ambassadors to the world. Our lives are not to be about us, but about influencing others to want to be followers of God in Jesus Christ, so that they too might discover what Jesus Christ has done for the whole world.

When do we begin this Lenten journey of reflection, a time to get right with God and a reminder of whom we work for, and for whom we live? As Paul wrote, “See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!”