

**Between You and G-d (Matthew 6:1-6): Ash Wednesday  
Keith Grogg, February 22, 2023, MPC/BMPC**

**Invitation to Observe a Holy Lent**

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 holy mystery of Easter resurrection.

We begin this holy season by acknowledging our need  
for repentance, and for the mercy and forgiveness  
proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The ancient sign of ashes  
speaks of the frailty of human life,  
and marks the penitence of this community.

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.<sup>i</sup>

**Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

[Jesus said,] "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven."<sup>2</sup> "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and

in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>3</sup>But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup>so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>5</sup>“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup>But whenever you pray, 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.

<sup>16</sup>“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>17</sup>But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup>so that 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.

<sup>19</sup>“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; <sup>20</sup>but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup>For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

### The Ash Wednesday Meditation

A great deal has been written about the social media phenomenon wherein much of what we see people posting about

themselves and from their lives—the selfies, the jovial group photos, the special events attended and memorialized, the perfect dinner plate—

is not, at its essence, the real life of the person doing the posting, but a cultivated, carefully curated presentation of the life we want the world to see as ours.

One of my best friends was going through an assortment of life traumas affecting his whole family and every part of his life. He said there really should be a version of Facebook that only shows the truth. Or maybe it could show the stage managed best case scenario, and then right underneath it would be a picture showing the real, more vulnerable and less palatable truths.

We batted around some possible names for what that negative-image version of Facebook might be called.

“About-face book.”

“Faceplant Book.”

“Red in the Face Book.”

“Let’s-Face-It-Book.”

But the meta-reality is that most of us who post on social media or see each other’s posts on social media are already in on the joke. We know this isn’t 100% real life. We know that it’s not about showing each other the unfiltered, objective realities of our lives.

One of my brothers told me that in looking through an old family photo album, he had noticed that I only ever have smiled one way: lips together, smile sometimes barely discernible, something about me looking almost guarded. He was wondering why everybody else has these big, toothy smiles while I'm standing there perhaps in an equally festive mood but lips definitively shut. And of course he wanted to know: what deep, psychological issue was going on with that?

I said, "We've been brothers for more than half a century now. During that time, have you seen my teeth? It looks like somebody left a jack-o-lantern out in the sun during a freak November heat wave. He said, "You don't look *that* bad." I said "*Of course* I don't look that bad! I chose the pictures."

We know how this works; we're all in on it. We display for the world the best possible version of our lives—you might say the most favorable version of ourselves: compiling our truly greatest and most beautiful moments—along with a dash extra, that's more aspirational toward what the world would most respect, envy, or love us for, with a careful culling of all the other stuff that needs to be kept out of the public domain and, ideally, swept out with the trash, never to be seen again.

And the social contract we share with each other is: you do that for your public image, and I'll do the same for mine, and we'll all know that we all know; and we'll keep pretending that we and our lives, are, most of the time, more or less perfect.

Many of us love and appreciate John Bell's lyric "Will You Come and Follow Me," even as we are entertained by the sound of the syllables in the part that goes,

"Will you love the "you" you hide if I but call your name?"

Jesus told the people who were clinging to him for meaning and hope and truth, and looking to him for guidance in terms of how to make it through this life: This is not the time for supposedly "faithful" observances that are only designed for show.

This is not the time for checking the right boxes to make you more appealing to the people around you.

This discipline—which is related to the word disciple—can never be about how good or enviable it makes your life *seem*.

The high, holy calling of the life God has given you is not to seem.

When you go through the demanding, rigorous examination of yourself, and what you have been and what you have done and what one day you will mean to have done with your life and your time and your love and your resources—

that process is not for public consumption. Go into your room and shut the door. This is between you and God.

The "you" you are behind that door—vulnerable, broken, beautiful, disappointed, worthy, humiliated, noble you—is

exactly the “you” whom God loves so much that God will give everything to save.

Your private, personal relationship with the one who conceived and created you before time began, who once brought together some atoms from the unfathomable depths of this universe, and who every day re-works them to re-create the physical body which is you—that relationship matters.

In that relationship, we don’t have to pretend—as a matter of fact, we can’t.

God loves you more than you can ever question or doubt yourself.

God is not pursuing you in spite of who you are, or what you are, or what you do or what you think about.

God is inviting you into an ever-deepening, ever more enriching relationship with Jesus because God loves you unconditionally.

And when that relationship is in full bloom, it is not only the essence of what it means to be alive, it is immediately, profoundly and intimately consequential for the world. Because when you love God, you cannot hate another who is made in God’s image.

And when you know Jesus, you see him in those who are least able to stand on their own in this world of injustices and cruel apathy. And with whatever you have and everything you are, you do something about it. You can’t help it: you want to.

And in the power of the Holy Spirit, God can do with each of us, and with all of us together, so much more than we could even think to ask or imagine.

In the meantime, as you enter into the discipline of this season of visceral commitment, tangible awareness, and holy mystery, go into your room and shut the door to pray in secret, and the One who brought you into being and loves you beyond all measure, who sees in secret, will give you the greatest gift of all.

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<sup>i</sup> Presbyterian Church. Book of Common Worship (pp. 249-250). Presbyterian Publishing. Kindle Edition.