

The benefit of having a three-year lectionary cycle is that we get a little bit of scriptural variation. But there are some Sundays and days of the church year where the text remains the same. And as the phrase goes *familiarity breeds contempt*.

Every year we read and listen to this passage in the warnings it conveys. We're warned about practicing our piety before others so as not to be seen. Jesus tells us to give our offerings privately and not to do it for applause.

The religious practice of fasting is somewhat removed from our time and place. But Jesus tells us that when we fast, we are not to disfigure our faces or to look dismal, so others feel bad for us. Rather one is to fast with the knowledge that it is God watching you and not others.

So, what we do with all that? At a certain level we can all relate to these issues. Who among us doesn't like applause? Who among us doesn't like to be acknowledged for the things that we do?

It occurs to me that those things in and of themselves aren't the issue. The issue lies in the motivation.

Given the climate of our world it's always a delicate dance when you offer a buzz word in a sermon.

There is a buzzword that has been floating around that relates to this passage. In fact, it plants the text right in the 21st century.

Have you heard the term *virtue signaling*?

In so many words, virtue singling is the act of publicly expressing an opinion in order to demonstrate that you are a good person. On the surface, this is not troublesome.

The issue arises when one places more importance on the appearance of moral correctness, then the correctness itself.

Basically, if someone is doing something solely for the purpose of receiving praise - it's fair to question their motive.

Our text tells us what the motivation of the hypocrites is. It's to be seen and to be praised for what they're doing.

*Virtue Signaling.*

Let's keep it here in the 21st century. The biggest culprit of virtue signaling in the world emanates from social media.

We all know the pattern. Something bad happens. People post their support of x,y,or z thing - and the engagement with said issue begins and ends by pressing *post*.

For obvious reasons - this is self-serving.

You see, those who do this virtue signaling are those who want to be seen as being on the correct side of an issue. Seems like a rather flimsy reason to support...anything. It's something done to paint them in a better light.

Motivation.

I can't imagine this is news to you. We see it all over social media.

The one that bugs me the most - every time there's some type of disaster there's always the obligatory, tired and worn-out platitude of thoughts and prayers. Okay, great.

Prayer is good, but... actions – that's where the spiritual rubber hits the road. Prayer without action comes across as an empty platitude. Empty words.

You may disagree with me, but that statement is as Pharisaic as anything.

Of course, there are those people who genuinely believe those words - *thoughts and prayers* - and those prayers produce action -change in the world. Jesus speaks to this.

All over our lesson from Matthew this evening we read about the things that are done in secret.

When you give alms in secret, your father who sees in secret will reward you. Whenever you go to your room to pray and shut the door it is the father who sees you in secret and the father who sees in secret will reward you. And the same goes with fasting.

So that brings us to the interesting dynamic of Ash Wednesday and the ashes that will adorn our head.

Why is it that we do this? ...smudge these ashes? Is it something that we have always done, is it routine, or is something deeper taking root?

Truth be told my two favorite services in the church year or Good Friday and Ash Wednesday.

They are two of the most raw and emotional evenings of the church year.

In both, we are reminded not only of Jesus' sacrifice, and the fragility of our lives, but also the reassurance of God's love and grace. For friends - without those things - all would be lost.

The ashes that are smeared on our heads are a stark reminder that our lives are fragile. Yet it also reminds us of the ways in which we are held in God's hands. And that because God has claimed us as God's own, we get to live lives of service, love, and grace.

And that brings us full circle - that brings us back to motivation.

Are we disfiguring our faces and praying so that others see us or do our actions point others to the One who deserves all honor and praise?

Put differently, when we smear ashes on our head is it so that other people see it, or is it a reminder of the ways in which God's love flows in and out of your life?

I suspect some of you see the irony in all of this. By putting ashes on our head, other people are going to see it.

You know what these ashes remind me of? They remind me that I am a hypocrite. That we all are. That we *need* God's grace.

Whenever people call Christians hypocrites - I say - kind of jokingly - "That's the point, we are hypocrites. We recognize that. But what's more is we need God's love and forgiveness."

Yet even with this love and forgiveness we should be vigilant. We should ask ourselves "Are there times where we are being self-righteous?"

Are there times where I am virtue signaling and holding my authority of morality over someone else to make me feel better? Those are private questions for you to answer, and for God to know.

As we've done for a few years, this evening, when you come forward and hear the words, "You are dust and to dust you shall return", you're reminded of where we came, where we're going, and how nothing can stop that.

And then, after that we hear these words, we take communion we receive God's grace. Through bread and wine, we receive the gift of life - so that the dust on our forehead isn't the end – but instead, a reminder of all that will be.

Thus starts the season of Lent.

Thus begins the season of self-reflection. and thus begins the journey to the cross. As we walked through these next couple of weeks on the road to Jerusalem remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return, but it is the cross that makes us whole is the cross where death was destroyed, and it is the cross that makes all things new.

Amen.