

R. Justice Schunior  
Ash Wednesday  
March 1, 2017  
Matthew 6:-16, 16, 21

### Practicing our Justice

Once again we are invited to observe a holy Lent. I like the fact that we're invited – the door is open. No one is pushing us through it. More than ever, I feel as if I don't know what kind of door I'm walking through in this season of repentance and self-examination. What are we doing and why?

Lent may be particularly disorienting this year simply because of the weather. For years, I have shivered outside of Capitol South Station on Ash Wednesday offering Ashes to Go until my hands went numb. It seems to make sense to start on a long road to Easter when buds and blossoms are tucked away inside the earth. Now it doesn't seem clear what awaits us come Eastertide. We are invited this year to a steamy Lent.

But even more disorienting to me this Lent is the circumstances in which we find ourselves as a nation. My husband and I were traveling recently, driving a rented car. In a parking lot we passed a man who clearly needed help starting his car. We stopped to help and in the course of conversation Andrew mentioned we were from DC. "I was born in this country. I'm a citizen." The man replied. We hadn't asked.

Telling that anecdote to a friend who has worked with Head Start in an urban center, he in turn told us that many of the kids in the program were not coming to school; their parents were too afraid of getting deported.

And perhaps fear of worse than that. Srinivas Kuchibhotla, a legal immigrant from India, shot dead because of the color of his skin. Jewish cemeteries desecrated and Jewish

Community Centers threatened with bombs. Daily there is a new outrage, a new reason to be disappointed in humanity. It would seem we don't need ashes on our foreheads to remind us of our frailty and our brokenness; we have the newspaper!

The admonition we receive from Jesus on Ash Wednesday seems particularly unhelpful. Each year we read the same scripture – Jesus' criticism of public piety. That has always seemed a little odd to me. The day we probably do the public act of Christian piety – walking around with ash in the shape of a cross on our forehead – is the day we hear how dangerous that kind of piety can be. Christians have often interpreted this to be a call to personal, individualistic practices that focus on one's own spiritual journey. It doesn't really seem to speak to the moment.

But of course Jesus would never mean for people to focus on their own inner work at the expense of neighbor love. He was not the type to counsel personal retreat as opposed to caring for one another.

Passage follows Sermon on the Mount – a vision for how the world could be, how God desires it to be...And, in fact, the word for piety, a word that doesn't hold a lot of meaning for us these days misses the root of the word, a root that would have meant a lot to Jesus' audience – *dikaiosyne* – the root is *dike* meaning justice<sup>1</sup>. Think about the passage again. "Beware of practicing your justice before others in order to be seen by them." It reads differently. Justice isn't justice if it's performed just in order to be seen.

Looking carefully, Jesus doesn't say anything against prayer, fasting, or almsgiving. He just questions our motivations. For example, almsgiving in the ancient world was often more

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<sup>1</sup> See this link for Greek Interlinear Bible: <http://biblehub.com/interlinear/matthew/6.htm>

about maintaining the status quo than alleviating poverty. The rich gave coins to the poor almost to solidify the position of both. “See my wealth, how I can just give it away. You have no choice but to accept because of your poverty.” It’s not dissimilar from our charity today. Rich philanthropists are publicly thanked and praised for their extravagant giving – it proves their wealth. Now, I don’t have anything against thanking generous donors, but it’s not really about justice, is it?

For us, we have to ask what are the practices that are justice creating and building that we can do. These could be personal and private. We might have to do some work on ourselves to be justice building people. We can’t really do justice work if we’re full of resentment or pride or overwhelming sadness or apathy. Things that you can do on your own that counter these tendencies are good Lenten practices. But also think of the communal things we can do that build our capacity for justice work – eating together, sharing our resources, even the cooperation that comes with singing together seems like a promising practice.

The invitation is open, no one, not even Jesus says exactly how you should get ready to be part of his Sermon on the Mount vision. Maybe it’s okay to be disoriented and shaken up. There are terrible things happening in the world right now that remind us how very far we are from God’s vision for us. But there is a second part of the story, yes we are dust, but God has done great things with dust and God’s vision is bigger and broader than we could ever imagine. We are once again invited to participate.