

# Ash Wednesday – Year B

## THE PROBLEM AND PROMISE OF REWARDS

Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Analysis by Bruce K Modahl

*[Jesus said to the disciples:] 1“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.*

*2“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.*

*3But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,*

*4so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*5“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.*

*6But 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.*

*16“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.*

*17But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,*


*18so 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.*

*19“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal;*

*20but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.*

*21For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*



**The gospel is preached  
to us and preached into  
us so that we come to  
trust the one who tells  
us the truth, “You are  
dust and to dust you  
shall return.” ...**

*From Canva*

*The gospel is preached to us and preached into us so that we come to trust the one who tells us the truth, “You are dust and to dust you shall return.” ... The reward he brings is forgiveness.*

# DIAGNOSIS: Dust to Dust

## Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem):

*Stripped of light  
We perform a pantomime of perfection.*

The lines above and at Step 2 come from Philip Kolin's poem "The Catechumens Recite their Scrutinies." Jesus scrutinizes the pious rituals of some and finds them to be pantomimes, performances, charades. They are not real. In a Christian publication I spotted an advertisement for a seminary. The advertisement featured a photograph of an Ash Wednesday service with student worship leaders imposing ashes. What drew me to the ad were the smiles on their faces as they reached their ashy thumbs to the foreheads of those who stood before them. How is it possible to smile at people and at the same time tell them, "You're going to die"? This must be staged for the camera, I thought. Perhaps they were saying different words, words they could smile over.

## Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem):

*We are lost in the dense darkness of self*

*Confusing the space of a coffin with*

*The  
size of a galaxy.*

In the Lenten season, God would draw us into the biblical narrative. The one who imposes the ashes repeats what God said to Adam and Eve as he banished them from the garden, "You are

dust and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19). We are inclined to pantomime the action and skip those words because we don’t want to hear such things. And we don’t want to hear such things because we don’t trust the One who first spoke them.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): *Banished***

The crowd rewards the pantomime performer with approval and applause. We create a narrative for our lives with ourselves at the center. With ourselves as the sum and substance, the narrative begins and ends in the dust. We have confused the space of a coffin with the size of a galaxy. It is to the grave we are banished.



Jesus fed the hungry,  
healed the sick, tended  
to the needs of (in  
Robert Capon’s words)  
the least, the last, and  
the lost.

From Canva

# PROGNOSIS: Cruciform Dust

## **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): *Rewarded***

And yet it is to that narrow chamber our Lord comes with his reward. God in Christ came from and returned to the dust as do we. He died on the cross for us. For our sakes he was buried. To the dust he committed our trespasses. The reward he brings is forgiveness. He rewards us with his own righteousness. On the third day this Man of dust rose from the dead and ascended to the right hand of the Father. The reward he brings is eternal life. So, the ashes inscribed on our foreheads form the shape of a promise.

## **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): *New Life in Christ***

At baptism the Holy Spirit inserts our lives into God's narrative. The Holy Spirit writes us into God's story. This good news is foreign to us. What is native to us is we must earn the reward. The gospel is preached to us and preached into us so that we come to trust the one who tells us the truth, "You are dust and to dust you shall return." There is nothing to smile about here. We can admit the truth about ourselves because we trust the one who speaks it to us. This is the One who forgives us, gives us his righteousness, promises us life eternal, and indeed gives us a great deal to smile about.

## **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): *Sharing the Rewards***

We do not hoard the rewards we receive from God. We share them. I propose we undertake the disciplines of Lent as Christ's benefits we share with others.

Repentance: We have the benefit of being able to turn to God for forgiveness not seven times but endless times. We are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation in the places where we live and work.

Prayer: Luther says God commands us to pray and promises to listen. Robert Jenson writes that as we live in Christ, we enter into the living personal community between the persons of the Trinity. We pray, he says, “to the Father, with the Son, in the Spirit.” This puts a new spin on the saying, “All we can do is pray.”

Fasting: If we give up something for Lent, let it be for the benefit of others. For example, give up a fast-food meal once a week and give the money saved to the community food bank.

Works of love: Luther made a distinction between political righteousness and the righteousness we have from Christ. In the political or civic sphere of life, works of love are works seeking justice. Jesus fed the hungry, healed the sick, tended to the needs of (in Robert Capon’s words) the least, the last, and the lost. With the benefit of Christ’s righteousness, we can’t help but seek justice in the neighborhoods and world in which God has planted us.

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# **Fifth Sunday after Pentecost**

## **Whoever Is Not Against Us Is for Us**

**Matthew 10:40-42**

**Fifth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Analysis by Matthew DeLoera**

40 Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. 41 Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; 42 and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.



Water is Life – Boamaeric1  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/>

The power and grace of God has a track record of bubbling up wherever and whenever we least expect, and in the most unexpected and unorthodox apostles who nonetheless pronounce Jesus' forgiveness to us and to others whether we ask for it or not. Jesus is persistent in his promise that we will not "lose our reward."

**Author's Note:** Verse 40 seems to establish the underlying principle of this lection, that the one who is sent represents

the full presence (or power) of the sender. However, verse 41 doesn't seem to have a Synoptic parallel and it is unclear as to exactly who such "prophets" and "righteous persons" are. So, I take a "prophet's reward" or "reward of the righteous" to signify what one might receive from the sender's own self. Therefore, Jesus would need to imbue the disciples with his same powers, for example to heal or to forgive sins, to then send them out in his own name. So then, who are the "little ones" in verse 42? If the verse is an adaptation of Mark 9:41, then we might consider "little one" to highlight the degree to which an emissary might even pale in comparison to their sender. Hence, I suggest that Jesus' ending phrase "none of these will lose their reward" might be better translated as something more like, "fail to gain what they expect or anticipate" (as my lexicon suggests). In other words, we may not think someone could or should pronounce absolution in Jesus' name (i.e., they don't deserve to do so), yet it remains efficacious. As Jesus advises, "Whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40).

## **DIAGNOSIS: Expecting the Worst**

### ***Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Unqualified Ministry***

**Grounding:** Prior to this conclusion of Matthew's "Missionary Discourse," Jesus has been instructing his disciples to send them out to do the same ministry that he himself has been doing. As he tells his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few" (Matt. 9:37). So, he gives them "authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness" (Matt. 10:1). However, Jesus also introduces an interesting twist by instructing them, "Take no gold, or silver or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff" (Matt. 10:9-10). On the one hand, this shouldn't be surprising if everything

ultimately depends upon God. Yet, they will also be dependent upon the kindness of strangers, and hence might face some questions as to how they could possibly render care if they go about so unprepared. We also know that the disciples look and act in unconventional ways like eating with unclean hands (Mark 7:2), which raises questions about the veracity of their discipleship. So, perhaps it's not so surprising that Jesus warns them, "When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next" (Matt. 10:23).

**Tracking:** We likewise question and evaluate those who minister in Jesus' name. We judge their appearance, perhaps the wardrobe of an ordained woman or a minister's uncovered tattoos or piercings. We judge them by their behavior, their sexuality, their language, their politics, or any number of other criteria. Of course, everyone seems to have their own opinions as to what makes one qualified to lead, and preconceptions as to what constitutes "holy."

### ***Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Guarded Hearts***

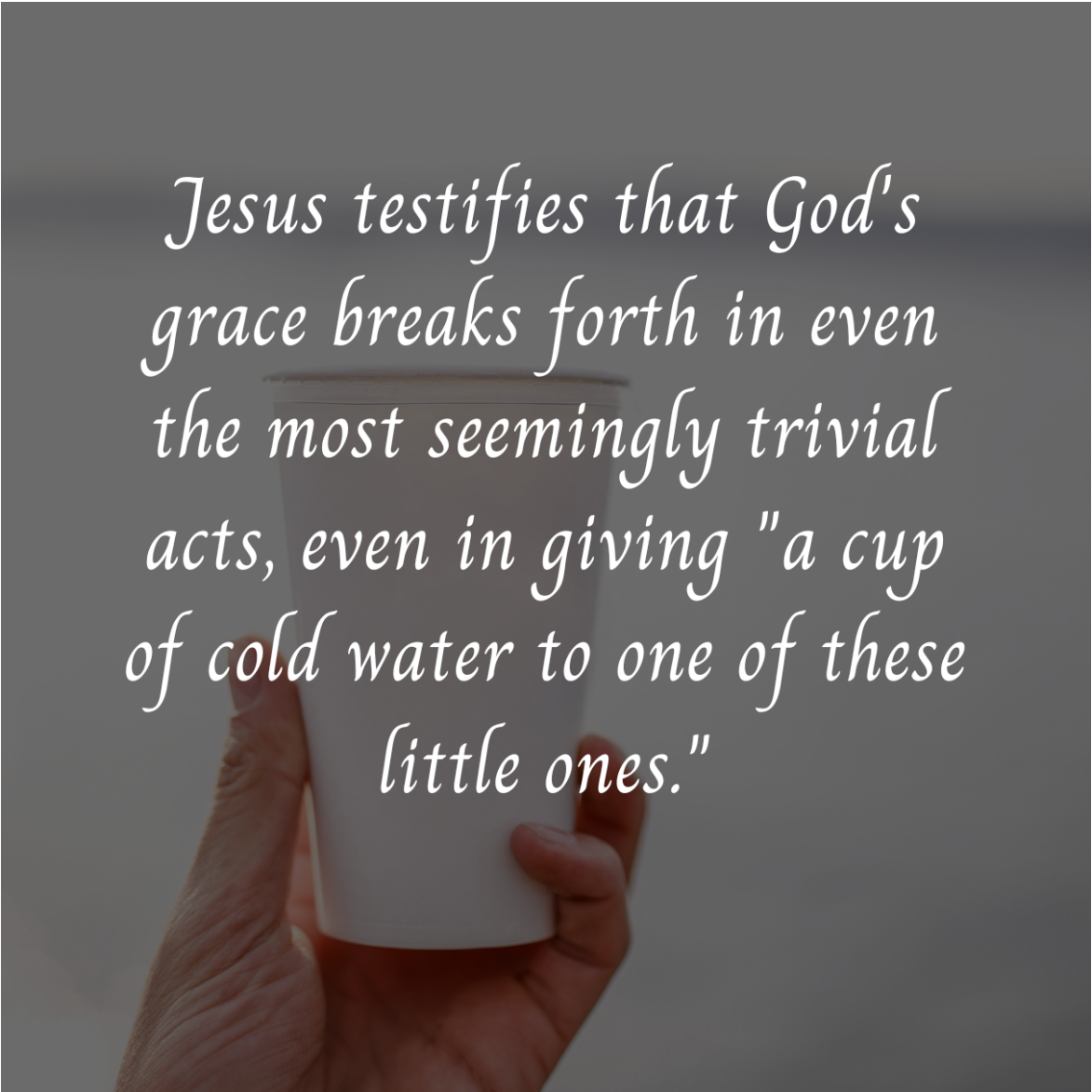
**Grounding:** The disciples will certainly encounter expectations from those whom they meet. Of course, the disciples are only human. They will face failure, like failing to cast the demon out of a boy (Matt. 17:14-20), whose father then reaches out to Jesus to fix what the disciples couldn't. Though they have successfully cast out many other demons with Jesus' authority (Mark 6:7-13), here they may be fully discredited and dismissed—perhaps because they have no second chance to make a first impression. Jesus himself knows how this feels by failing to live up to Messianic expectations, as when John's disciples ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Luke 7:20). No wonder he asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" (Mark 8:27).

**Tracking:** We're exacting. When our expectations aren't met, we're unwilling to extend grace or a second chance. Perhaps we've been disappointed and burned so much that we're desperate to guard our hearts and not take risks; we convince ourselves that such action is wise or discerning. "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me." If we judge the book by its cover that's just proactive. Why even risk disappointment at all? Why not avoid change and stick with tradition as much as possible?

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Lost Rewards**

**Grounding:** In Mark's synoptic account, long after the apostles "cast out many demons" with Jesus' authority (Mark 6:7-13), they witness a stranger casting out demons in Jesus' name, become alarmed, and try to stop it because the person was "not following us" (Mark 9:38). Surely, they know the overwhelming need they and Jesus face. Are they alarmed because they think the action is just theatrics unless it comes from a "real" disciple (i.e., Jesus' name not being enough in itself)? Do they feel outshined by an "untrained" outsider, and so do whatever they can to shut it down?

**Tracking:** Ultimately, we don't trust that Jesus' name has power, because we don't trust the absolution that lies behind it. It surely can't be purely unconditional or freely given, either for us or for others. Certainly not for ourselves, hence all our hard-fought and determined efforts to atone or compensate. We set ourselves up as arbiters of God's grace, restricting its means and channels in the name of "good order." It's irresponsible to give credence to unorthodox, good acts—as if anyone can pronounce healing or forgiveness (i.e., "mutual confession and consolation"), lest it become "cheap." Instead, we judge these actions despite the risk we may just "lose our reward."

A hand holding a white cup against a blurred background. The text is overlaid on the image in a white, cursive font.

*Jesus testifies that God's  
grace breaks forth in even  
the most seemingly trivial  
acts, even in giving "a cup  
of cold water to one of these  
little ones."*

*From Canva*

## **PROGNOSIS: Receiving the Harvest**

### ***Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Persistent Promises***

**Grounding:** Yet Jesus will not be restricted or arbitrated by any of us. He makes the most unorthodox move of all, by letting himself be crucified and killed in the name of "good order." Defying all logic and reason, he is raised after three days, fully unbound from anything that could possibly inhibit his

determination to forgive or liberate us or others. This, despite our tenacious efforts to oppose him.

**Crossing:** The power and grace of God has a track record of bubbling up wherever and whenever we least expect, and in the most unexpected and unorthodox apostles who nonetheless pronounce Jesus' forgiveness to us and to others whether we ask for it or not. Jesus is persistent in his promise that we will not "lose our reward."

### ***Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Surprising Grace***

**Grounding:** Jesus further testifies that God's grace breaks forth in even the most seemingly trivial acts, even in giving "a cup of cold water to one of these little ones."

**Crossing:** Jesus' unrestrained grace and forgiveness purposely catches us in unguarded moments. In turn, we find ourselves transformed by a faith that is determined to give us a taste of the same grace by whatever means available. So, in hope, we give the benefit of the doubt and extend the same graciousness to others than Jesus shows to us. We're no longer hounded by fear of mistakes, the burden of responsibility, or a nagging sense that we need to strive for extraordinary acts of holiness or devotion. We finally recognize a true gift for what it really is.

### ***Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Unearthed Hospitality***

**Grounding:** As Jesus equips his disciples to go out in his name, he tells them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (Matt. 9:37-38). This mission can never depend on their labor alone; God will call others into untold vineyards and fields.

Crossing: We get to witness the new reality brought about by Jesus' words: of laborers venturing into some of the most seemingly inhospitable or unorthodox fields and being surprised by a hospitality that we otherwise never could see or imagine.