

Ash Wednesday, Gospel Year B

SPIRITUAL UPKEEP

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday

Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

[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.”*



DIAGNOSIS: More Seen than You Want

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Curb Appeal

The pop artist Andy Warhol once commented, “In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes.” And, oh, how right he was. But as social media explodes and platforms expand, we have so many people vying for attention, that it’s harder to be seen in the crowd. Still, we want not just to be noticed. We want people to stop and admire us. So we only allow people to see what we want them to see. We create curb appeal.

Step 2: Advance Diagnosis (Internal Problem) Pretty on the Outside

The celebrity-stars of YouTube and Instagram seem to rise and plummet to the earth more quickly than ever. Maybe “world-famous

for 5 minutes” would be more accurate. But being seen has its cost, hence the “rising-stars-plummeting-to-earth” metaphor. If our admirers were able to surveil us—peek through the windows to see what’s inside—even the best among us will disappoint. Either we stop being interesting, or our image is soiled. Truth be told, this kind of “being seen” is impossibly superficial—like staging a house to sell it quickly. But we can’t live up to others’ good impressions of us for very long. Nor can we live up to our expectations of ourselves. Even the most impressive public figures experience “imposter syndrome”—the fear that people will discover us for the fake we are.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): The Gutting We Need

Ash Wednesday presents us with a disturbing truth: When the exterior doesn’t match the interior, we don’t just have a fame problem, we have a God problem. We may think that we can practice our piety publicly, but God has our number. We may think we can store up treasures on earth, and still feign appropriate spiritual poverty, but we are mistaken. We may get our 5 (or even 15) minutes of fame, but God will need much less than five minutes with us to see what imposters we are. This old house needs to be gutted.

PROGNOSIS: The Fixer Upper



Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Down to the Studs

God is not impressed by outward appearances. So it shouldn't surprise us that God's lasting impression with us begins with God's own ugly and haunting cry from the cross. God, who sees us for who we are, shows up for us where we need God most—in our messy inner sanctums. Sure, God sees the well-maintained exterior paint-job, and the adorable window dressings of our faith: the piety practiced publicly, the offerings sacrificed sanctimoniously, the florid prayers projected loudly. But God knows that the interior of our spiritual house is a wreck: covered with the dust of neglect, the shambles of our self-worth

swept under the rug, the relationship photos askew. So Jesus, the one who knows God from the inside out, brings all our ugliness to the surface, crying out: "It is finished!" Then Jesus takes all of it to the grave. And he leaves it behind, there, when he rises. And with the wreckage of sin and death cleared away, he beats a straight path to our hearts.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): New Order

The amazing thing that regularly happens when someone does work on your house, is that suddenly you become self-conscious and attentive to the mess yourself. You know that you are not equipped for the foundational fixes and that the deep cleaning is better left to someone else, but you begin to see how you might actually contribute to the cleanup. You notice the carry-on luggage you've been stepping over for weeks. You feel embarrassed that you've neglected maintenance. You greet the contractor or the cleaner at the door with Swiffer in hand, and apologies tumbling from your lips. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Spiritual Upkeep

Anyone who fixes up a house knows the work is never quite done. No sooner have you repaired a room, than you see the next job that clearly needs to get done. And the area rug you just vacuumed? Well, more pistachio shells have fallen, and the cat has coughed up another hairball. Yuck. So it goes with our souls. In this lifetime, God's work is never done. But, with things in better order inside, we're less worried about what others might see or think. We focus our attention on welcoming others in, consider how to make them comfortable, and concentrate on meeting their needs.