

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

March 2, 2022 Ash Wednesday

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today is the first day of Lent, which is a time set aside to intentionally turn back to God in order to strengthen our relationship with God, and it all begins with us putting ash on our foreheads, which seems weird after what we just read in Matthew - that we shouldn't show our piety in front of other people.

But, ash is actually tied to repentance, to turning back to God, to being humble before God. When the Hebrew people were under siege or in great torment, they would sit in ash and call out to God to forgive them and come save them. This was done as a community, unless you were one of the prophets trying to get everyone to realize that they needed to repent.

So, what Jesus is saying in Matthew is don't go around individually showing off your piety in order to get others to think more highly of you than they should, because that is actually sinful. It breaks the first commandment. We are to trust God - not ourselves and the things we can do – including giving alms, praying, and fasting.

Those things are all well and good, but they are only in response to God being God, not to earn salvation, and not to get other people to think we are somehow extra special.

So, tonight is a good night to remember what is in the 10 Commandments.

There is an old tradition in the Episcopal Church to use the 10 Commandments as the Confession of Sins during Lent, and there is also a tradition in the Lutheran Church to focus on the Small Catechism during Lent, which begins with the 10 Commandments.

The first commandment is – You are not God! Which is the most important commandment of them all – that's why it is #1. God is God and you are not. And all of the other commandments fall off of this first commandment.

When we forget that God is God and make ourselves God, the one in whom we trust, we sin against God and other people.

We are to walk humbly with God and not try to be God. This is why we put ash on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday and hear the words – remember you are dust and to dust you shall return. We are not God.

The second commandment is – Don't use the Lord's name in vain, which means that you shouldn't use God's name inappropriately. You shouldn't say things about God that aren't true. As Bishop Curry says, if it's not about love, it's not about God. When people use God's name for hate and violence, which is their own hate and violence, they are sinning. Not only are they lying, but they are also abusing God's name in order to get what they want, not what God wants.

The third commandment is to keep the Sabbath day holy. Why? Well – that ties again to number one – you didn't create everything that exists, so take a break already. Rest and rely on God who is God, because you are not and creation needs you to stop doing things and just be at least one day a week.

Commandments two and three are about how we sin against God when we forget God alone is God. Commandments four through ten are about how we treat others poorly when we forget that God is God. When we forget God is God, we go after what we want with total disregard for the Creator and other creatures.

The fourth commandment is about our parents – the ones who gave us life. Number 4 says - Honor your mother and father. It's a short step from dishonoring our parents to dishonoring God who ultimately gives us life. So, honor the fact that your parents birthed you into this world.

The fifth commandment is – don't kill anyone. You are not the life giver and therefore you are not to be the life taker awayer either. Respect all life, including your own. Don't go destroying life that God is creating.

The sixth commandment is – don't commit adultery. If you have made a commitment to someone, keep it, just as God keeps God's promises to us.

If you go around breaking marriage covenants, then you have not only usurped the couple's vows, but God's example as well.

The seventh commandment is - do not steal. If it's not yours, don't take it. It was a gift from God to that person and you are not God nor that person, so leave it alone.

The eighth commandment is - don't tell lies about other people. First assume the best about others until you find out otherwise. Don't forget that God created everyone and loves everyone, including you, so you don't have to cut down others to lift yourself up. Everyone is God's beloved.

The ninth and tenth commandments both concern coveting. Don't covet other people's stuff and don't covet their people either. Basically, don't be jealous. God has given you all sorts of wonderful things. Be thankful for those things. Stop complaining and just say thanks. As Meister Eckhart said – if you've said thank you, you've said enough.

The 10 Commandments are all about our relationship with God and with one another. How strong our relationship with God is impacts all of our other relationships. So, first and foremost, we need to strengthen our relationship with God, so that we can love others as God loves us, and the first step is simply acknowledging that God is God and we are not.

And I know. It's hard. It's what got Jesus nailed to a cross and not much has changed in 2000 years, aside from the resurrection.

So, as you come up for ashes this evening, I want you to notice something.

First, I'm going to put the up and down part of the cross on your forehead. When I do that, it looks like the number 1. This is to remind you of the first commandment. You are not God.

Next I will put the side to side line across it that will then make that 1 into a cross reminding us that our sinfulness put Jesus on the cross. Jesus died, because we put ourselves in the place of God.

But, that is not the end of the symbol.

Tonight's ash cross is put on the same place where a similar cross was placed eternally on our foreheads in baptism, sealing us with the cross of Christ forever, reminding us that we are eternally connected to God, even when we forget and start to depend only on ourselves.

The good news is that we are forever forgiven sinners and when we acknowledge our sinfulness we actually grow closer to God, because that's when we realize we need a savior! And we have one.

Christ is always waiting for us with open arms and he actually comes closer to us when we confess our struggle to trust God and our urge to depend only on ourselves.

Tonight, with ashes on our foreheads, we are making a commitment to walk humbly with God so that we can grow in our relationship with God. Tonight we acknowledge our sinfulness and turn to God, not for salvation, because that is already ours, but for healing and wholeness.

We do not have to depend on ourselves. God loves us and will always take care of us. God continually says – Lean on me. On Ash Wednesday we say “OK.” We're going to try.

Remember God is God, and we just are dust. God is immensely stronger than we will ever be and God loves us unconditionally, because God created us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.