



CRUSADER LUTHERAN CHURCH

God's Vision Our Mission

A More Meaningful Lent: It Starts By Asking ... WHY?

Sermon for **March 9, 2011** — Ash Wednesday

Pastor Sandra Cox Shaw

*Rather than Focus on What We Do During These 40 Days, Jesus Urges Us
To Examine Our Motivations, Stay Humble & Reconnect with God*

Scriptural Reference: **Isaiah** 58:1-12; **Psalms** 51:1-17,
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; **Matthew** 6:1-6, 16-21

These days, I am living a dilemma. My dilemma is, I have never liked to be around people who brag and boast. I had a mother who said, "Do not act above you're raising." (Any of you of the South know that.) "Behave yourself; don't draw attention to yourself."

I tend to avoid people who brag at all costs; I will turn around and go the other way if I see them coming. And I was never going to be one of those people who bragged. In a weird, ironic way, you could say that I have always been proud of my humility.

There's an old clergy joke about a seminary professor who said to his class, "I have preached many brilliant sermons. I am a brilliant preacher. And the greatest sermon I ever preached was called *Humility ... and How I Attained It.*"



Anyone else here proud of their humility? It's a pretty ironic thought. So I was going through my life being pretty humble – in my humble opinion – and then in February, a life-changing event happened to me: I became a grandmother.

Now people run and scatter when I pull photographs out of my purse. I'm the one that people turn around to get away from when they see me coming. It's not really that bad, but I wouldn't blame people if they did. And I know I have friends, when they get email and see "Baby Pictures" on the description line, they probably roll their eyes.

I don't really know why I do it. It makes no logical sense. I did not give birth to this

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little fella. If my understanding of genetics correctly, I donated 25% or less of his gene pool. So why do I want to share his pictures?

Now on a day when I'm feeling grounded, I would say it's because I am so amazed by this little miracle. "Can you believe what God has done?" I want to say. "Look at those tiny fingers! How on earth can I look at him and see my parents and his parents and grandparents? How can God do something so miraculous?"

At other times, yes, it is bragging: "Look at my beautiful grandson." I'm trying to work on it, because I don't want to stop being proud of my humility.

Now Jesus, in the Gospel of Matthew, has a lot to say about our humility as we live in a community of believers. Jesus cautions us against practicing our piety in front of others. He even talks about hypocrites, which I always love.

I love when Jesus talks about hypocrites, because I can really get indignant – righteously indignant – and it's so much fun to pick on them ... until you realize you are hypocritical yourself, at times. Then it's not so much fun.

But, it is Ash Wednesday tonight – and once again, we come to this reading from Matthew, as we do every year ... and we look for its message for us this day. In a nutshell, I believe Jesus is talking about *relationships*. He is giving us divine guidance on how we conduct our relationships – with God and with one another.

We are all aware that we are saved by faith and not by works, whether we're Lutheran or not. However, that does not mean we don't need to examine ourselves and our behavior and our attitudes. And Lent – especially Ash Wednesday – is the time that the church has set aside church for such examination.

The question I would suggest that our readings for tonight and, indeed, for all of Lent itself is this: *Why do we do the things we do?* This time of year we think and talk a lot about *what* we will do ... what we will give up ... what we will add to our lives ... what we will do to commemorate the season of Lent.

But rather than what, I think it is much more important to ask, "*Why?*" Why do we do what we do? Why do we celebrate and commemorate Lent?

Now, I hope we all have a lot of experience with the practice of prayer that Jesus raised first. We certainly talk about it a lot. And, Jesus talks about giving alms – and I know we are a generous bunch of people. We support our local congregation. Both congregations support Community Ministries of Rockville.

I'm not so sure about the fasting; I know very few people who fast. It's not a big

practice among Lutherans. But if anybody here is fasting tonight, I cannot tell. You have washed your face. You have combed your hair.

So we pray, we give our time, our talent, our treasure to ministries. We sacrifice at Lent – either not eating something or giving up an activity: chocolate or alcohol or meat. Last year, I gave up non-essential shopping, which opened my eyes and I learned a lot about myself. I'm going to try to be brave enough to do it again this year.

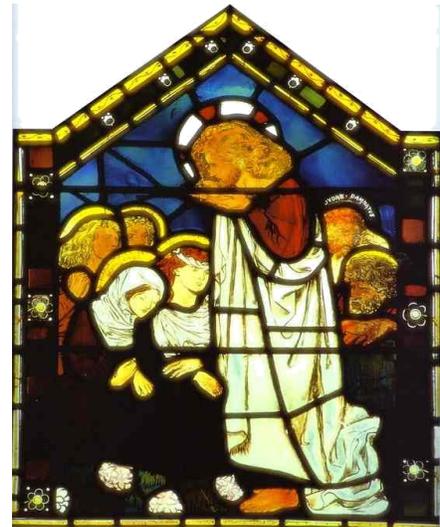
And I don't think any of us here really put our faith in the treasures of earth. And we do indeed, as Jesus cautioned us, look to heaven – to the Kingdom of God – for our ultimate security. Yes, we know the spiritual practices of Christianity. We know what is expected of us at Lent. It's not news to most of us.

But **WHY?** Why do we do these things? If it is because of our neediness for attention, then Jesus says, "You need to re-think things." Once upon a time when I was much younger, I thought it was only children and young people who searched and yearned for attention. I'm older and wiser, and I realize there are just as many "supposed-to-be-grown up" people looking for attention.

If our need for praise and our desire to be seen and heard by other people is the reason for our spiritual practices, then we are placing our relationship with God in danger. Christianity is not a competitive sport. There are no winners and losers – and even if there were, we don't have the ability or authority to decide who is which.

Any practice that places the emphasis on ourselves instead of God will change our relationship with God. Theologian Douglas John Hall writes that when worship becomes about us and our own egos, it waters down our relationship with God. Whenever our spiritual practices are focused on ourselves and our egos instead of being about communicating with God, we slip into the land of idolatry, the worship of our own ego.

Why do we do what we do? Why pray and give alms and practice religious rites and rituals? Why bother with Lent at all? Few of the folks around us really pay it much attention, do they? If you are like me, you've had to explain to people numerous times just what Lent means.



Sermon on the Mount

Dante Gabriel Rosetti

1862

Stained Glass
All Saints Church, Selsley
Gloucestershire, England

If our goal in worshipping and observing spiritual practices is to turn our hearts and minds and souls towards God – our heavenly, loving, ever-forgiving, ever-patient parent – then we are on the right track.

If our goal is to deepen that connection to the divine and the holy – to the miraculous that is God, the creator of the universe – then Jesus says we're on the right track.

And in a world of “me-first” ... a world where we experience every day the prospect of being judged and critiqued and criticized ... a world that is such a competitive environment ... I find it wonderful that we can – even if just for a short time, even for this small time we're in worship or in our own devotions – turn the focus away from ourselves and focus on *God*. That fills our soul. Focus on God.

How wonderful, I find it, that in our anxiety-filled, Prozac- and Xanax-taking world, we know that we are welcomed by the Creator, who created atoms and universes. We are invited to come and lose ourselves in that Divine Other.

Now, does this mean that we never publicly talk about our faith and the wonderful miracles God has worked in our lives? No, you're not getting off that easy. You can't shut up about your faith and think you're being humble.

There is a role for us to proclaim the Good News of God, telling our stories of what God has done throughout history, with the prophets and the people of Israel, and the first disciples, and our great-grandparents, and our grandparents ... and us. Telling those stories is important; it's vital.

But the question is: If you're telling the story, who is the hero of your story? Is it God ... or is it yourself?

So, why do we do what we do? Why bother with Lent? Regardless of whatever spiritual practice you decide to participate in – if you give up something, if you add reading the Bible more, giving more money to ministries – my message to you is, please just stop to ask yourselves why you are doing what you do.

In a world where people love to be seen, to be heard, to be noticed, to be singled out for praise ... in a competitive world where it can seem as if everybody's out to stroke their own ego, to break their arm patting themselves on the back ... I would encourage all of us to use these 40 days to deepen and strengthen our relationship with God. To grow closer to this wonderful God who performs miracles every day.

Reach out for God. Look for God's presence in the world around you, searching to be connected to the Divine God. Let that be our reason for doing what we do. **Amen.**