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Matthew 6:1-6, 1-21
February 17, 2021
Ash Wednesday
Prepared for: Lutheran Church of our Saviour, Greenville, SC

- Teaching experience...seven years, all in early childhood.
 - Favorite? Kindergarten, but I also taught preschool and first grade.
 - What do they have in common?
 - Their choices and behavior are heavily motivated by a desire for approval from the adults around them.
- My last year in Kindergarten...
 - 25 students—the largest and, thanks to the personalities involved, in some ways the difficult I experienced
 - Still...loud, active, rowdy students could be reined in by saying something like, “Wow, Brandi! I like how quickly you went to your desk and sat down!” or, “Timmy, you did a great job hanging your coat in your cubby when we came inside!”
 - No matter whose names were called, the entire class came to attention!
 - It worked in parenting, too!
 - “I like it when you put your blocks away the first time I asked,” prompts a quicker response next time.
- The challenge to this kind of discipline? Children start to do positive things, and then seek attention for their behavior!
 - “I put my backpack in my cubby!” or, “I’m sitting quietly, too!” or, “I went to the line the first time you asked!”
 - Can you hear the need for attention and approval behind these cries?
 - Some children become motivated to appropriate behavior *only* when they receive approval for it, and may choose negative behavior if praise isn’t offered.
 - Negative attention is still attention.
- More commonly, though, I saw positive results from it.
 - Children who have been given approval for proper choices have high self-confidence and make healthy choices on a regular basis—even when they aren’t given praise for it.
 - Intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation.
- Are we adults that different, really?
 - This is, after all, a significant reason for organizations acknowledging a gift...they’re hoping for more in the future, and they know that humans respond to affirmation.

- “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.”
 - Twenty years, from my beloved, “It makes no sense! Jesus says, “Don’t practice your piety in public,” and then we go and put ashes for everyone to see!
 - Let me be clear in stating that JESUS DOES NOT SAY WE SHOULDN’T PRACTICE OUR PIETY IN PUBLIC!
 - Jesus DOES say we shouldn’t do it in order to garner attention for it!
- Basically, if your reason for coming to worship on Ash Wednesday is to wear your ashes proudly and make sure everyone knows what a faithful Christian you are, you’re doing it for the wrong reason!
 - And this may make us uncomfortable, but it seems to be human nature for us to seek approval and attention from others.
 - Maybe that’s not our first motivation for participating in ministry, but I’ll say it again: Affirmation feels good!
 - Most of us, obviously, are here because we seek to serve God. And we do this because we love God.
 - We don’t “sound a trumpet” before ourselves in order to garner attention.
 - At the same time, if we’re honest with ourselves, we do put value in what others think of us.
 - We like to be appreciated for what we’re doing. We like to be recognized for our work.
 - Saint and sinner. Always.
- This Ash Wednesday is different.
 - You won’t leave here with those ashes on your forehead.
 - And maybe, after nearly a year of isolation and separation because of the pandemic, we need it to be different. Maybe we don’t need the blackness of those ashes to remind us of the darkness that is abundant in our world.
- At the same time, this Ash Wednesday is the same.
 - Instead of ashes being placed on you by a pastor, you will trace your own baptismal cross.
 - And instead of looking in the mirror and seeing the darkness, you will look and see only yourself—the beautiful, beloved child of God that you are.
 - The cross that you can’t see this year? It’s still there. It was put there at your baptism, to mark God’s claim on you. And there is nothing you can do to diminish the gift of love and grace that it brings.
 - This is good news!