

“Practiced but not Performed”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Our gospel passage creates an obstacle of irony for a service that engages in the dusting of ash on forehead. In Matthew, Jesus instructs us to practice our piety in private; do not pray in the synagogue or on the street corner, but in the secret of your room; and when you fast, freshen up your face, even put oil on it, so it looks like you are celebrating rather than sacrificing.

Perhaps you feel comfort that most of us will be heading back home, though— not to work, or to Shoprite, and looking at the time I don't expect any of you are headed to a Valentine's date after this. So there will be no parading of a public witness of our ritual activity since day is done.

And yet, here we are, praying, in public, in a sanctuary. We are in community as we confess and lament our sins and face our mortality. You don't realize this yet, but you will even be invited to take on any kind of bodily posture with the recitation of Psalm 51. Presbyterians don't typically have kneeling benches in the pews, but that doesn't mean we *aren't allowed to* kneel, bow, or stretch out in a pew when we pray. And soon, we will wear ash on our faces, as a reminder that it is from dust we come, and to dust we shall return.

We are a community that lives in close proximity to some of the best theater and music in the world. Even if we do not have the money or connections to go into the city to see incredible performances, chances are, we all know someone who makes a living by performing. And so, we understand what it means to put on a costume, to take on a role or follow a conductor, and to pull out your best and receive the reward— hopefully— of a crowd's applause, a critic's positive review, or the promise of future work.

But the rewards of the practice of faith are a bit different. They don't always shimmer and glow. But what they bring is an intimacy with God that goes deeper and more lasting than any performance. How do we come to a faith that honors practice, more than performance?

Jesus tries to teach us ways to inhabit our faith in ways that are genuine. In order to foster that, we may consider a some questions.

First of all, we may ask ourselves, **am I performing my faith for an audience? And if so, who *is that audience*?** A colleague of mine recently told me that she grew up with the notion that God is a white man. And though this colleague has brown skin, she spent years of her life trying to please a white God. When it dawned on her that whiteness is not God, and that her brown skin is as much made in God's image as anyone else's, her faith became something much closer to her. She quoted the poet Ntazake Shange, saying, “i found god in myself and i loved her i loved her fiercely”

Many of us look toward a God who looms above us in judgment, ready to declare our inadequacies. And so, we perform with hopes that we can somehow measure up. We should ask ourselves, **Am I performing my faith in ways that I hope will hide the real me from God?** Tradition says that Psalm 51 is a confession David wrote, in reference to the ways he committed misconduct in his impregnating Bathsheba. The psalm mentions many actions that perhaps David thought would help him get right with God. And maybe these actions did help him get right with God. However, I am more interested in whether he tried to make right with those he hurt and harmed in his treatment of Bathsheba and her husband Uriah, than I am about whether David was cleansed by the purging of hyssop. Let's not let our faith actions become a mask through which we hide ourselves from God.

The God we know in Jesus came to live in human skin, incarnate in flesh. This is a God who has practice in what it means to be human, so that we can have practice in what it means to be holy. Practice is a daily measure. It is not something we win or fail at, like a performance.

I am not saying that the acts of prayer and of almsgiving to the poor, or abstinence from something material, are not worthy endeavors. Any of these can be tools that help in our practice of faith. But when the action becomes a performance rather than a tool for our spirits, then it can become something behind which we hide, rather than something that helps us grow more faithfully into that whom God calls us to be. So another worthwhile question of faith this Lent is this:

Am I playing a role that is separate from me, or is it a role that can become me?

I felt the stirrings of a call to ministry in young adulthood. At that point, the preacher who had filled my ears with the most hours of sermons was the pastor of the church of my youth. Everyone raved about what a good preacher he was. However, I remember finding his sermons rather boring, heady, and not something that enticed the spirit. But I figured I must have it wrong, since everyone else around me seemed to go on and on about what a great preacher he was. So when I went to seminary and began writing sermons, I found myself thinking, "How can I make this sermon longer?" And with this preacher as the largest role model in my head, I found myself adding things to my sermon that were academic but dry. Because that is what I assumed people wanted to hear. What I did not find, until several years later, was the more authentic preaching voice the Spirit had put within me. I did not find it, because I was trying to sound like someone else. I needed more practice becoming me, rather than to perform like someone I was not.

The theologian Howard Thurman spoke about how one might listen to find that voice within. He said,

"There is in you something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself and sometimes there is so much traffic going on in your minds, so many different kinds of signals, so many vast impulses floating through your organism that go back thousands of generations, long before you were even a thought in the mind of creation, and you are buffeted by these, and in the midst of all of this you have got to find out what your name is. Who are you?"¹

¹ Howard Thurman, in a 1980 Commencement Address at Spelman College

This season of Lent is a quiet one, and it gives space to listen for *that* voice, for the sound of the genuine, for that part of you that God set within that is uniquely you, but also at the same time, of God.

That does not mean that we use this season of Lent to sink into a solely individual experience of faith. We are together tonight, and our ashes and the truth of our mortality is exposed for one another to see. We will soon be told, "Mortal, it is from dust you come, and to dust you shall return." Elementally, we— like the dust— are made of atoms, and these atoms are made of electrons and neutrons. We are all made of the same stuff. It is humbling to think that one day, when we will be dust, the things that distinguish us, one from the other, today will not so much matter.

And yet, there is so much God can do with dust. From the dust of the earth, God breathed life into humankind and set God's spirit within them. Tonight's dust will remind us that God can do that yet again, and does. Tonight is the night when we as humans grapple with our own mortality; on Good Friday, Jesus must face his own mortality. But in this stretch of Lent, we may find ways when holiness appears even in our human, mortal existence. Not only that, we will find that God's love reaches us through our lives, into our death, and even beyond what death may bring.