

March 9, 2011 – Ash Wednesday (A, B, C)

### Readings for Ash Wednesday

1. Joel 2.12-17

Psalm 51.3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 14, 17 Response: "Be merciful to me, O God."

2. 2 Corinthians 5.20-6.2

3. Matthew 6.1-6, 16-18

### Reflections on the Gospel Reading by Bill Hunt

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As we enter the season of Lent we reflect on the traditional works of piety – almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. The Jesus tradition passed on to us through Matthew's community counsels us to consider not only the motivation behind these practices but also the *place* where they should be performed. By doing that we can gain some insight into how truly radical the demands of Jesus' teaching are.

### **Context in the Sermon on the Mount**

In order to fully appreciate today's gospel passage, we need to understand it in the context of the Sermon on the Mount. In the Beatitudes (Matthew 5.3-12) Jesus called his followers "blessed" or "happy," even though they were people whom the society of his time looked upon with scorn or pity. In the so-called antitheses (Matthew 5.17-48) Jesus reinterpreted some key moral teachings of the Mosaic Law on murder, anger, adultery, divorce, oaths, and retaliation, culminating with the command to love enemies. Basically, Jesus told his followers to love their neighbor by refusing to press even legitimate honor claims in order to avoid the kind of violence that

escalates into feuds and tears society apart. The disciples are not to play the honor game by the usual rules.

In Matthew 6.1-18 (which includes today's passage) Jesus turns to love of God or worship and makes pronouncements on the pious practices of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. He counsels his followers to avoid doing these practices "in order that people can see them [Greek: *émprosthén ton anthrópon*]," that is, in order that males could receive praise from other males. Rather, they should perform these practices "in secret" so that they would win praise only from their heavenly Father. Here Jesus does more than prohibit his followers from playing the honor game. According to Jerome Neyrey, Jesus commands them to vacate the playing field. (1998, 213-228)

### **What does "in secret" mean?**

Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount Matthew's Jesus says: "Just so, your light must shine before others [Greek: *émprosthén ton anthrópon*], that they may see your good works and glorify your heavenly Father." (5.16) However, in today's reading he seems to be saying just the opposite. Why does Matthew's Jesus permit his followers to perform certain acts in public but forbid them to perform other acts in public? What does it mean to give alms, pray, or fast "in secret?"

#### **1. Intention**

Some commentators say that Jesus is not condemning all pious acts done in public. Rather, he is condemning those pious acts done *only* to win praise from others. "True piety is not for show. Right deeds must be accompanied by right intention. . . . The Father in heaven rewards only those whose motives are pure; who care not for what others think but only for what is right before heaven. The key is intention." (Davies & Allison 1988, 576-577)

#### **2. Secretly or without attracting notice**

Others say that it is a matter of avoiding ostentation and acting as anonymously as possible. "It is ostentation in personal piety that is criticized here: drawing public attention to almsgiving, praying in public places so as to be seen, and calling attention to one's fasting. Such people have

to be satisfied with public recognition as their reward. They will get no reward from God. On the other hand, God will reward those who keep secret their private acts of piety.” (Harrington 1991, 96-97)

No doubt Jesus counseled right intention and avoidance of ostentation. However, that would have been neither remarkable nor controversial either during his lifetime or at the time Matthew was writing his Gospel. Ancient Rabbinic texts recommended secrecy with almsgiving. For example, Rabbi Eleazer said: “A man who gives charity in secret is greater than Moses our teacher.” Also, Rabbi Yannai rebuked a man who gave money to a poor man in public by saying, “It had been better that you had given him nothing than that you should have given [to] him and put him to shame.” (Quoted in Davies & Allison 1988, 580-81.) “The notion of private piety coupled with disdain for external appearances was well known to the ancient Jews. At this point the [New Testament] offers nothing new.” (Davies & Allison 1988, 578)

### **3. One on one with God**

Still other commentators think “in secret” means that prayer at least should be a matter strictly between the individual and God. “Hidden from the crowds, even from other family members, the prayer can become what it is supposed to be, communion between the individual and the transcendent God.” (Hans D. Betz quoted in Neyrey 1998, 221)

This confuses our contemporary notions of public and private with those that prevailed in the first century Mediterranean world. Jerome Neyrey’s withering criticism of Betz’ notion of individual communion with God is instructive: “It is simply anachronistic and ethnocentric to ignore the cultural meaning of public and private in regard to a gender-divided world and to impose modern notions of individualistic personality on ancient group-oriented persons.” (1998, 221)

What, then, does Matthew mean when he presents Jesus as ordering us to worship God “in secret?”

### **The honor/shame context**

To answer that question it is necessary to understand the culture of the people to whom Jesus and Matthew were speaking. According to authors such as Malina, Neyrey, Pilch, and Rohrbaugh the driving force of that culture was honor. Honor, sometimes referred to as “name” or “reputation,” was public recognition of a male’s worth. Its counterpart “shame” was ambivalent. In men it was a lack of honor or the consequence of a failure to act in an honorable way. In women it was a keen awareness of and an avoidance of any action on her part that would reflect unfavorably on the male members of her extended family.

In that society, both activity and place were gender related. Apart from sleeping and eating, males were expected to live *out-of-doors* associating with other males in *public* places and engaging in public activities such as plowing, sowing, gathering crops into barns, and discussing civic matters in the public square. Apart from necessary trips to the well, the village bakery, or the market (all at the proper time of day when men were not present) the place for women was *in the home* engaged in *private* activities such as caring for children, preparing meals, and doing household chores.

In order to sustain his honor (and possibly gain more) a man had to be seen by his peers to be acting honorably. Honor without recognition was no honor at all.

In the dominant Mediterranean culture of the first century these rules also applied to worship. In order to be considered honorable, a male had to be seen engaging in worship. As a result, worship had to be a public activity in a public place.

### **Jesus’ meaning**

If Jerome Neyrey is right, in today’s gospel reading Matthew’s Jesus is attacking the very foundations of this cultural presumption. For Jesus “in secret” is equivalent to “in the house” or “by oneself,” that is, at home with one’s extended family. “[T]he key issue in his [Jesus’] claim resides in his redefinition of male space—‘in secret’ instead of ‘in public.’ On this point, Jesus flagrantly challenges the great code of honor.” (1998, 218)

At least as regards works of piety, the honorable place for males to act is within the household, not in the public synagogue assembly or in the public temple courts.

In proscribing the public forum where loyalty to the old forms of Judean piety were practiced, Jesus effectively challenges his disciples to break their social and ceremonial ties with their neighbors, ties that functioned to confirm their identity and give them honor. . . Let us not underestimate the effects of Jesus' demand: (1) a rejection of gender expectations for males, the effect of which is (2) a challenge to previous social relationships, which will result in (3) shame from one's neighbors. Jesus requires of his male disciples nothing less than a radical break with the public world and an espousal of the household as the locus of piety. Thus we interpret the phrase "in secret" to mean the household, the private world of females. Jesus' demands will cost the disciples dearly in the court of public opinion for avoiding male but frequenting female space. (Neyrey 1998, 219-220)

Jesus was challenging some of the core values of his culture with regard to worship. He seems to be saying that in the honor/shame culture of his time it was impossible to worship God in public because the whole purpose of acting in the public sphere was to gain honor and recognition from other men, not from God. It was impossible to give alms, pray, or fast with the right intention and with lack of ostentation, precisely because the culture of the time demanded that they be done in public where they could be seen.

### **Contemporary Application**

How can we translate Jesus' teaching from its first century cultural context to our own radically different cultural context? The tiny Jesus movement was a distinct minority still developing its stance toward the pagan world and toward what would eventually become rabbinic Judaism. Today, the Christian Church is a dominant force in contemporary western culture.

We have very different presuppositions about gender-related roles and places. Apart from the act of childbearing itself there are few if any roles exclusive to one gender. Apart from lavatories and dressing rooms, almost all places are open to both sexes. Although vestiges of the male dominated honor and shame culture remain, our core social values are quite different. The ancient extended family household has been replaced by other forms of family living.

It is not enough for us to imitate the actions of Jesus and his disciples slavishly. We have to look at what is going on in the Church today and see what entangles it with values that are contrary to the Gospel.

### **Almsgiving or Charity to the Poor**

What does giving alms “in secret” mean today? What widely held contemporary values does it challenge? Consumerism and conspicuous consumption come to mind. It is not just the adulation that ordinary people heap on the rich and famous. Many of us seem to enjoy the respect we get from having a beautiful home, driving a late model car, wearing stylish clothing, and offering hospitality to our guests with drinks and fine food. How much of that respect are we willing to forego so that we can contribute more to the poor and hungry? What is the base of comparison for our definitions of necessity and luxury – the jet setting Donald Trumps of the world (See *Newsweek*, Feb. 16, 2009, 32-34.) or the one billion people who live on less than a dollar a day? (See Egeland 2008.) Where would Jesus draw the line?

### **Prayer**

Similarly we may ask: What does “praying in secret” mean today? What widely held contemporary values does it challenge? In a groundbreaking speech during the first session of the Second Vatican Council in 1962, Bishop Emile De Smedt denounced triumphalism, clericalism, and juridicism (legalism) as the principal evils besetting the Church. (Alberigo 1997, 337) How do triumphalism and clericalism affect the way we pray? Have we become so clericalized that we don’t even think of the home as a place for worship or family members as capable of leading it?

It is important to remember that the household as the exclusive place of worship was characteristic of the Church of the first three centuries. Especially after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 C.E., this was in marked contrast to the mainline Jewish practice of males worshipping in public synagogue assemblies. It was also contrary to the pagan practice of males worshipping in their temple precincts. (Both Jews and Pagans also had household worship practices, but this was not the exclusive place for their worship as it was for Christians.)

By our standards and even by the standards of the Jewish and pagan worlds of that time, the Christian churches were incredibly decentralized. Christians worshipped in private homes rather than in public buildings, and referred to their church assemblies as families or households. (The Letter to the Colossians, for example, ends with greetings to various people including “Nympha and the church in her house.” [4.15]) Still, this was a time when the Church experienced incredible growth and vitality in spite of the low social status of Christians and in spite of frequent persecutions. Can we learn anything from this regarding the size and organization of our worshipping assemblies? What does this say about “full-service mega churches,” multi-million dollar cathedrals, or rallies in Yankee Stadium?

## **Fasting**

The cultural translation is particularly difficult with regard to fasting, mainly because the historical Jesus prohibited his disciples from voluntary fasting as an act of piety. (Meier 1994, 439-450; 2009, 392-393) Moreover, fasting is mentioned nowhere in the letters of Paul. (Davies & Allison 1988, 617) By the time of Matthew’s Gospel it seems to have been tolerated. Around the turn of the first century The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles (Greek: *Didache*), apparently referring to Matthew 1.16, states: “Do not let your fasts coincide with those of the hypocrites. They fast on Monday and Thursday; you, though, should fast on Wednesday and Friday.” (*Didache* 8.1) With the rise of monasticism in the second and third centuries voluntary fasting became a widely practiced ascetic practice in the Church continuing to our own time.

Today perhaps it is best for us to look at fasting as a necessary precondition for almsgiving. We fast from luxuries in order to be able to share our wealth with the poor. Obviously, we should fast for the right intention and, outside of the family, be as quiet about it as possible. Fasting from luxuries - not just food - can be countercultural as an antidote to conspicuous consumption.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, all of this raises the complicated question of inculturation. To what extent should the Church accommodate itself to modern culture, and where should it take a countercultural stand? It is not always clear how almsgiving, prayer, and fasting can break through cultural values such as individualism, militarism, consumerism, racism, clericalism, triumphalism, or sexism with anything like the force of Jesus’ reorientation of the honor/shame culture of his time.

Yet, our churches and homes are locations where this cultural critique can take place, and Lent is a good time to raise such questions and prayerfully search for answers.

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For these reflections I consulted the following works in addition to the biblical texts:

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Stuhlmüller 1978 – Carroll Stuhlmüller, C.P., *Biblical Meditations for Lent* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 6-7.