

## Privacy Concerns

The fact that I am delivering this sermon in real time to a congregation of one, plus a camera, is a pretty good reflection of just how odd things are in Greater Seattle in March of the Year of Our Lord Two Thousand and Twenty. Schools and libraries are closed. Companies that can do so are having their employees work from home. Other businesses are laying off employees and even shutting down. We are in the midst of a pandemic, a virus that has spread around the world causing illness from mild to severe and even death. This is not what I had in mind when I planned this Lenten series of sermons.

Nevertheless, I am persisting. I think perhaps we'd all like to take a break from fretting over the progression of COVID-19 around the globe and how our community and families are coping with it. And, I have faith that, with God's help, we will weather this storm. Hopefully, the leaders of our world will learn some valuable lessons about preparedness. Whether it is a question of weeks or months, life will return to normal and we'll go back to the things that preoccupied us prior to the reports of a new virus running wild in China.

One of those concerns, here in the U.S., will likely be for the state of our privacy as individuals. More and more, we come to feel like the characters in George Orwell's famous dystopian novel, 1984: "Big Brother is watching." Or, perhaps more accurately, "Big Brother is watching and so is his shady cousin and your skeevy niece." It does seem as if our government is dipping into our personal lives more and more with intrusive legislation and surveillance of various kinds and that's a good reason for concern. But of greater concern is the relentless mining of our personal data by corporations, mostly from what we freely offer up, and the ever-increasing threat of identity theft by those who hijack our internet feeds or go through our trash, information taken from us unwillingly. In our age of hyper-connectivity, privacy seems more and more elusive. We have privacy concerns.

Jesus had privacy concerns, too, but his were different from ours. He wanted his followers to be more circumspect about things that he saw others freely sharing, indeed, to use a current phrase, "over-sharing." Jesus always saved his harshest criticisms for those who used their religion as a tool to show how wonderful they were or as a weapon to bash others for not coming up to their example. In the first half of Matthew 6, in the core of the Sermon on the Mount, we get Jesus' observations on three aspects of traditional piety and how those life-giving practices could be warped into something quite destructive. Matthew opens this section of his reporting of Jesus' teachings with a quote from Jesus that neatly summarizes this privacy concern: "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."

As the first of the three spiritual practices that he sees being abused, Jesus cites almsgiving. That's a pretty old-fashioned term that we don't use much anymore. Merriam-Webster tells us that alms is defined as "something (such as money or food) given freely to relieve the poor." The same dictionary notes that the word "alms" is "archaic" for "charity." Whenever I hear the word "alms," my brain flashes me a memory from an old movie with a wretched looking beggar with outstretched hands monotonously chanting, "Alms, alms, alms for the poor..." I have no idea what movie it was that I saw originally with that line but it's been used plenty, even to comedic effect in "Monty Python's Life of Brian," when the supposed-Messiah is approached by

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a man requesting “Alms for an ex-leper,” presumably one who’s been healed by Jesus but has no idea what to do now. But I digress...

We are, of course, well-acquainted with the concept and actions of charity, even if we don’t call it “alms” anymore. We give to our church’s general fund so that we can pursue our calling from God here in Lynnwood. We give to the Benevolence Fund so that I have money at my disposal to turn into Safeway gift cards to help feed hungry people. We give to our national ABC missions offerings, like the America For Christ offering which, among other things, is helping to rebuild the still-devastated regions of Puerto Rico. I think this congregation is pretty good about sharing our financial resources to help others. And we’re pretty quiet about it, too. As far as I know, no one person in our congregation knows what any other person’s total gifts to and through Good Shepherd are.

But in Jesus’ time and in ours, this was not always the case. “So, whenever you give alms,” Jesus says, “do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others.” Now, there is no evidence of any regular practice of people literally blowing trumpets when they gave to the collection at the Temple or to individual beggars in Jesus’ time. But we all know the phrase, “Don’t blow your own horn,” and I think this is what Jesus is getting at. Don’t make a big deal of your charity.

Having worked in non-profit institutions for nearly my entire working life, I can tell you that there are plenty of people, Christians and not, who like to blow their own horn over their charity. Visit any performing arts institution and look for the displays on the walls and in the programs listing donors by the amount of money they give. Those who give the most are atop the list, names in a big, bold font. As the amount given decreases, so does the size of the type. Many charitable institutions don’t even bother to list donors at the small end of their lists. Those gifts, they are saying without words, can be easily replaced. But you best believe that the big-time donors are represented.

So, what’s wrong with getting your gifts recognized? I think Jesus hits the nail on the head: “Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” When we are publicly recognized for what should be a private act, we get the public acclaim we are looking for. But how does that change our lives for the better? It makes us feel like big shots; not a particularly admirable character trait. But when we give in secret, we know that we have done the right thing and that brings a completely different sense of satisfaction. It’s knowing that we have helped someone without expecting anything in return. And that, my sisters and brothers, is how we bring our lives into step with Jesus, who died for us without expecting anything in return.

As you all know, I grew up primarily in Southern Baptist churches where there was more of a tradition of public prayer than there is at Good Shepherd. Every meeting began with prayer, every Sunday School class. There were, as there are here, multiple opportunities for prayer during the worship services. But the tradition in those churches was to spread the responsibility for corporate prayer more widely than the pastors and the Sunday School teachers. Everyone was expected to be ready if Brother Preacher said, “Mr. (or Mrs.) So-and-so, would you lead us

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in prayer?” or to be ready to volunteer if the leader simply said, “Will someone lead us in prayer?” I can remember thinking as a smart-aleck teen that some of the folk who were always ready to jump up and intone should have read Matthew 6, verses 5 and 7: “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward... When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.”

In the years that I have been a pastor, I have learned what an awesome responsibility (awesome in the true sense of the word) it is to pray on behalf of others. That’s what I do when I stand in front here and pray the invocation or the benediction and especially the pastoral prayer of joys and concerns. I work hard to represent as well as I can the combined hopes and fears of all of us before God. Sometimes I do a better job than others. But I encourage all of you to think of two things when the responsibility comes to you. First, remember that you are praying on behalf of others. Your private prayers should be exactly that – private, between you and God. Second, remember that all of us are grateful to have someone else, particularly someone that we know and love as we all do each other in this congregation, praying on our behalf. Neither we nor God care if you stumble and stammer as long as you speak your heart.

In January, we had the remarkable opportunity of having two highly regarded scholars teach us about the Lord’s Prayer, found here in Matthew 6:9-13, so I will not belabor the point and repeat what Charlie and Pam Scalise said so much better than I. But I do encourage us to remember that Jesus taught that prayer in the context of this preaching on spiritual practices and how they work. If, indeed, we pray with verbal ruffles and flourishes, designed to make people admire us and our eloquence, then we have missed the point. Other humans are not the intended audience for prayer – God is. We should ask God for what we, corporately, need. We need for God to be honored throughout our world. We need for God to use us to heal the world and bring it to the wholeness of God’s vision for creation. We need to have our creaturely requirements met – food, clothing, shelter, friendship. We need to remember to forgive, just as God forgives. And we need – O, please God! – God to gently guide us away from fouling up. In other words, we pray not to change God but to ask God’s help in changing ourselves.

The final section in today’s Gospel reading always makes me feel vaguely uneasy. I’ve never been a part of a congregation that practiced fasting on a regular basis. I know of several churches in our area, mostly Black churches, for some reason, that do practice fasts of various kinds. They may practice a simple diet for a prolonged period or have short-lived fasts of bread and water or liquid only. I see some of my friends get a great benefit from this, both in terms of their physical and their spiritual health. The issue, of course, for me, is that as a diabetic I have to keep a very tight rein on my blood sugar and balance my consumption of food with my consumption of medication. To eat too little is as dangerous as to eat too much. The same is true for many of our Good Shepherd family, due to medical conditions or age. But while I’m not going to advocate here for an immediate adoption of the discipline of fasting, I think it does behoove us to consider what that spiritual practice is all about. Prayerful fasting reminds us of how dependent we are on the grace of God and the work of others for our food and for other necessities of life. It’s a reminder to be grateful to God, to those who supply our food, to those who built our homes, our cars, who made our clothes, grateful for all the good things in our lives.

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Before I was diagnosed with diabetes, I fasted for about 20 hours along with Connie while she was in labor with Colleen. I am eternally grateful to God and the staff of the local Whataburger for the meal I grabbed on my way home to tell Kit he had a little sister. Oh, my gosh, that burger was good. And prayerful fasting also helps us to be in solidarity with those for whom fasting is not a voluntary spiritual discipline. This week is my fifteenth anniversary among you and some of my favorite memories of our time together are tied up with what used to be a regular occurrence here: observation by our youth of World Vision's 30-Hour Famine. The kids always had a lot of fun on those weekends but more importantly it helped them to understand the desperate straits of so many of our brothers and sisters around the world. I think we grown-ups learned a thing or two as well. So, fasting can be a spiritual discipline that helps us to align our hearts with both God and those whom Jesus called "the least of these." But not if all we do is boast about how righteous we are or how we've suffered.

In his book, We Make the Road by Walking, Brian McLaren posits that these spiritual disciplines, charity, prayer, and fasting, are about changing ourselves so that we can participate in changing the world. As the old saying goes, "Be the change you want to see in the world." He offers these closing thoughts, which resonate deeply with me, so I am appropriating them: "The world won't change unless we change, and we won't change unless we pull away from the world's games and pressures. In secrecy, in solitude, in God's presence, a new aliveness can, like a seed, begin to take root. And if that life takes root in us, we can be sure it will bear fruit through us... fruit that can change the world." My sisters and my brothers, we are limited just now in how much we can impact the world through our physical presence but there is still much we can do of good in charity, in prayer, even in fasting, health permitting. Let us use our time away from the ordinary hustle and bustle to examine anew our spiritual practices, so that with God's help we may continue to change the world. Thanks be to God! Amen.