

Ash Wednesday Meditation

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First Presbyterian Church, Durham

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Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Every Ash Wednesday, I make sure to watch Around the Horn. It a sports talk show on ESPN, aired weekdays at 5 in the afternoon. It features four sportswriters debating the issues of the day, in a fun, lively, and competitive way. Tony Reali is the host. He's an energetic guy in his 30s, who awards points for the different arguments that the sportswriters make. Now, I like sports. I even like sports talk, as long as its thoughtful and humorous and not mean or loud. But that's not why I watch. I watch every Ash Wednesday, because Tony Reali hosts Around the Horn with ashes on his forehead. Reali is Catholic, originally from New York, and he does his very public job with ashes very publicly on display. He's the only person I know on TV who does this, and he's done it for years. I love him for it. I like him well enough anyway, but I love him for it.

Jesus sermonizes to those with him on the Mount, to us here now, to Tony, to anyone who will listen, "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." Well, shoot. Here we are – on one of the most public days for our faith – when we mark ourselves as followers of Christ as much as if we had on Easter finery or our Christmas Eve-best, and this is the text we run into. Come on, Jesus, be cool. It's Ash Wednesday. Can't we put this off until Sunday, maybe? Nope. Jesus is not cool. Jesus is so not cool he makes the point five more times – for the people in the back – do NOT sound the trumpet,

do NOT let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,

do NOT be like the hypocrites,

do NOT look dismal,

and/or do NOT store up for yourselves treasures on earth.

Ah. Don't. I said don't. That means you. Even you, Tony.

Because life can be a game show. Fun and lively, sometimes loud and mean, life can be a game show where we're all getting points for the things we do and say. Maybe those points are dollars. Maybe they're retweets, likes and snap streaks. Maybe they're grades and college acceptances. Maybe they're promotions, tenure and awards. We're all constantly scoring each other, while at the same time trying to score points off each other. It's actually something that starts in middle school, when, developmentally, our peers and what they think begin to matter more to us, and the familiar opinions of our families matter a little less. Researchers talk about how we begin to live in front of an imaginary audience, as if we were always onstage. The secret, of course, is that the audience isn't imaginary. We are always on display, especially in this social media, everything-on-video age. And it doesn't go away. As we get older, it just gets subtler and more complex, and we learn to negotiate it better, because we become subtler and more complex ourselves. In his play As You Like it, William Shakespeare wrote that "all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." He's right. But it's not a play that they – that we – are playing in. It's a game show. And bonus points for quoting Shakespeare.

I believe that's what Jesus saw among the religious leaders around him. He saw God's good law, the one given by Moses that had guided God's people for centuries, he saw it turned into a game show, where public prayers and visible fasts were the points. There was a trumpet bonus for giving money to the poor, and the final round was storing up treasure. Largest, heaviest treasure wins, of course. Religion is a contest. Faith is a game show played in public for all to see. Cool points matter. Right?

Nope. Jesus is so not cool. God is the real judge, Jesus reminds us. God is the only true scorekeeper. It's an old, old Biblical metaphor for God, and it makes us bristle, because we have seen so many people presume to be God's lieutenant scorekeepers and deputy judges over the years, with tragic and deadly consequences. It is important to know our tragic history and to work to make it right, as best we can. But that's not the only reason we bristle. We don't want God to be a scorekeeper because God is not like the other contestants with whom we can compete, negotiate, maybe even defeat. We are all-too-aware that we cannot compete with God. God will not play our little games. God alone is the giver of rewards, Jesus says, not the non-imaginary imaginary audience, not the bosses, not the internet, not the college admission officers, not even the people who claim to speak for the Almighty as lieutenants and deputies. God alone. God alone. Six times over, God alone.

By the way, in the midst of all this, it's worth noting what Jesus is already assuming. He is assuming that people are giving alms, giving their money to the poor. He is assuming that people are praying to God. Indeed, in the section we skip in this passage, he shares the Lord's Prayer as a good example of an all-purpose, daily prayer. Jesus is also assuming that people are fasting, giving something up – not as a second chance at New Year's resolutions, but as a tool for contemplating God instead. And finally, he is assuming that people are planning for their future. Praying and fasting, how we spend our money and prepare for what's next, these are the building blocks of faithful life. For all of his condemnations and not-coolness, these are not up for debate at the moment. They are a given. This Lent, this lifetime, let prayer and fasting, money spent justly and futures planned faithfully, be the givens of our lives. The question is not what or even why.

The only question is: How. This life of faith, with its discipline and social justice and great hope for the future, how do we live it? Competitively? Do we play it like a game show? Are we trying to score points? Or do we treat God as the non-imaginary audience, the one we can't always see but trust is always there?

I have never met Tony Reali, and I doubt I ever will. I am certain he does not wear ashes on his forehead for my personal benefit. I suspect, I hope, that even though he hosts a game show, he does not wear them to score points in the world. Rather, he might wear ashes precisely because he knows where his treasure actually is – with God – and that his heart and head are there, also. Amen.