



Ash Wednesday

Charity

[RCL]: Joel 2:1-2,12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 103 or 103:8-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Dear People of God: I invite you to the observance of a holy Lent, a time to renew our repentance and faith, by prayer, fasting, and self-denial, and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word (paraphrased from the Book of Common Prayer's Ash Wednesday liturgy).

It is Ash Wednesday, the day when Christians focus our hearts on prayer and repentance as we begin the season of Lent. During Lent, we re-boot our practice of discipleship through spiritual exercises of prayer, fasting, and generosity. As we focus on Christ's life and ministry, leading to his sacrifice and resurrection, we begin a season of living an intentional Christian life. In popular culture – and often in practice – Christians observe the Lenten custom of “giving something up” like alcohol or chocolate or meat on Friday as a practice of self-denial and repentance.

The prophet Joel, the psalmist, and Jesus, in today's Gospel passage from the Sermon on the Mount, each call for sincere, interior repentance. The psalmist cries out: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me!” The prophet Joel urges us to return to God with all our hearts, with fasting and repentance. Jesus offers us some guidelines for a spiritual practice of repentance: giving alms, praying, and fasting in secret. Charity (or giving alms), prayer, and fasting are manifestations of the repentance and faith we are to practice with cheerful and humble hearts during Lent.

Jesus' directions for the correct methods of practicing our faith are clear. We are not to practice our piety in order to be seen and recognized by others; rather, we are to give alms, pray, and fast in the privacy of our homes and hearts. When Jesus teaches us to beware of practicing our piety before others in order to be seen by them, he urges us – indeed, commands us – to avoid self-righteousness, to fast in secret, and when we give alms, to not let our left hand know what our right hand is doing. Humility is an essential quality of the practice of giving alms, of charity.

Jesus' teaching to the gathered disciples by the Sea of Galilee echoes traditional Jewish teaching. Tzedakah (tzay-DAH-kah), often translated as “charity,” is an important obligation in Jewish thought, an instinctive way to give thanks to God, to remember the departed, or to ask for forgiveness. In Jewish tradition, three

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acts gain forgiveness from sins: teshuvah (repentance), tefillah (prayer) and tzedakah, or giving to the poor. The word tzedakah is derived from a Hebrew root meaning righteousness or justice. Thus, giving to the poor, in Judaism, is an act of justice and righteousness.

While the word “charity” suggests a magnanimous act by the wealthy and powerful for the benefit of the poor and needy, tzedakah is actually an act of respect, of giving the poor their due. The spiritual benefit of giving to the poor is so great that a beggar does the giver a favor by allowing a person to perform tzedakah.

The levels of tzedakah were codified in the Talmud by the great twelfth-century scholar Maimonides but had been a part of oral Torah scholarship even before the time of Jesus’ earthly life. Maimonides’ discussion of tzedakah is deeply instructive for our Lenten practice of charity. At the bottom of the list is giving begrudgingly, followed by giving less than you should, but cheerfully. Awareness of this spiritual distinction has practical application for daily giving. Rather than cheerfully putting our eleven or thirty-seven or sixty-three cents change in the tip jar on the coffee shop counter, perhaps you will find yourself moved to pull out a dollar bill. Next in the ascending order of righteousness is giving after being asked, then giving before being asked. Note that these are all good things, but the greater spiritual benefit is still to come.

The higher levels of tzedakah address giving alms in secret. Giving when you don’t know the recipient’s identity, but the recipient knows yours, is lower on the list than giving when you know the recipient’s identity, but the recipient doesn’t know yours. Giving anonymously is an essential act of humility. It is even more righteous to give when neither party knows the other’s identity. When we give anonymously, without expectation of acknowledgment, recognition, even thanks, then we truly become selfless, giving for the glory of God, who sees in secret. This is Jesus’ point exactly.

For most of us, giving anonymously is more difficult than giving generously. Storing up treasures on earth might include having your name at the top of a list of generous donors, while storing up treasures in heaven may take a bit more thought and prayer.

Let’s look at a case study. A neighborhood church is offering its space as part of Family Promise, an interfaith hospitality network that provides shelter, meals, job support and case management for homeless families. Your parish is supporting this program as a local act of social justice. The call goes out: sign up to bring and host a specific meal, or provide a dessert, or do laundry, or perform various other tasks associated with this act of holy charity. You sign up to bring a dessert one evening and put together a pleasing plate of homemade cookies and pastries. It’s late afternoon, after the church office hours, so you let yourself into the church kitchen, using the door code you’ve been given. You leave your offering on the counter, with a simple note, “Dessert for Family Promise”, and you quietly depart. You’ve spoken to no one, you’ve not met the recipient of your small act of charity, you’ve not left your name. This is anonymous giving, and it feels very different from dropping off a meal face-to-face. Anonymous giving is different for the recipient as well, and it merits contemplation and prayer to discern the different spiritual

benefits. Who to thank? To whom to offer gifts and hospitality? In the absence of a designated giver or receiver of an act of charity, the offerings and thanks must be to God!

On this Ash Wednesday, let us focus on charity as penitence and prayer, a practice of discipleship and intentional Christian life. Say yes to storing up treasures in heaven! Establish a Lenten practice of tzedakah, charity, of simple, local acts, done quietly. Put money in the tip jar, write a check to your church or a local charity, give to a GoFundMe. A charitable act doesn't have to be about money. Include simple acts of hospitality and welcome in your practice. Smile, be kind to a stranger, write a note or card, let someone ahead of you in line. If you have an impulse toward a charitable act: do it. Act. Now. Cultivate the habit of being open to opportunities for charity. Discipline yourself to give anonymously and give thanks to God. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Amen.

Susan Butterworth, M.A., M.Div, is a writer, teacher, singer, and lay minister. She leads Song & Stillness: Taizé @ MIT, a weekly ecumenical service of contemplative Taizé prayer at the interfaith chapel at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). She teaches writing and literature to college undergraduates and writes book reviews, essays, and literary reference articles.