



"A SEASON TO RE[MEMBER]" – MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday

By: Reverend Shonda Nicole Gladden

This is not a sermon to be read.

Yet here you are reading this sermon today.

While I do not profess to be an expert in homiletics, I have preached a few sermons in my day and what I have found is that sermons are meant to be experienced. The proclaimer and pulpit are meant to join in a co-choreographed and co-curated experience of delivery. Whether the pulpit be of wood or plexiglass, in a makeshift sanctuary in a shantytown outside of Nakuru or in township like Langa, I believe sermons are meant to be experienced.

Yet here we are.

Proclaimer and reader.

Here we are taking a journey together in consideration of Ash Wednesday.

So, how shall we sojourn one with another?

I want to invite you, the reader, to imagine that we are engaged in a conversation, one with another.

I want you to imagine that instead of eye to screen or eye to page, that you might have ear attuned to my voice.

For my voice and my heart tend to be communicative in ways that my written word cannot. So, for the time that is ours, enter a space of imagination with me and let us consider, the Gospel according to Matthew the sixth chapter, verses one through six and sixteen through twenty-one wherein these words are found:

6:1-6 "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. So whenever you give alms, 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. 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. 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. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

6:16-21 "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

If we were together in person I would invite your response by saying, "This is the Word of GOD, for the people of GOD"... "Thanks be to GOD."

Comrades and kin, I love social media. As a mothering, partnering, clergywoman scholar activist, I have found social media to be a lifegiving outlet where I have cultivated a community of accountability and support. Like many of you reading this, I have "people," "friends," "followers," and "fans" on social media. Yet and still as a good AME, which I do fancy myself to be, I have had to learn wisdom in how I show up in the virtual streets as not everyone understands my occasional dry humor and others do not particularly appreciate the tongue in cheek ways that I express care concerning social sanctions for behaviors deemed unbecoming a person in my position.

Notwithstanding my love for social media, it is still a very public space. People can become viral sensations for doing what some may consider the most germane, every day, things; many of us have made plans to be "where the money reside" this year. Still others can have their lives turned upside down from social media posts where their less-than-ideal life experiences become fodder for public debate; take for example, Tessica Brown's most recent health trauma. Social media is a very public space.

While we can utilize settings to ensure our posts reach only certain sets of eyes, and we can self-moderate by posting in code and sharing strategically, except that we completely forsake the engagement of social media, much of our lives are impacted by social media. From WhatsApp, QQ, Clubhouse, TikTok, LinkedIn, and Facebook to Instagram and even MySpace, there is no shortage of opportunity for everyday people to have public platforms; and how we use those public platforms is important.

So, what does the public-ness of social media have to do with this gospel lesson in this week's lectionary? What does it have to do with a Season to Re[member]? I would like to suggest that both those of us who have any measure of social media engagement, as well as those who prefer to shun social media as "the devil's playground," can all find a Word from GOD as we prepare to journey into this Lenten season.

Popular culture is replete with interesting depictions of the Lenten season. From movies that mock sacrificing cake, cookies, sex, and other seemingly trivial physical things to the lavish experiences of Mardi Gras where people practice extravagant overindulgence in carnal lusts, this season of 40 days, excluding the Sundays, can be confusing if we are not careful. I also want to suggest that it can have us all over the place if we are not intentional.

Ash Wednesday is a time in our liturgical calendar when we ought to take a minute to give an account and examine how we are living. It is a season to reflect on our own individual efforts to intentionally draw closer to the Almighty. It is a time to inventory what our hearts, minds, bodies and souls have been doing for the past however many days, months, or even years its been since we last checked in with GOD in a purposeful way.

While prior to COVID we marked this season in community, through worship experiences involving the imposition of ashes, foot washing services for some, and candlelight vesper services of reflection for others, Ash Wednesday is not about the community. While the community will benefit from those of us who take this time seriously, this time is not at all about the public, but rather about our private lives. Which leads me to my first point in this sermon reading.

Point #1: Save some secrets for the Savior.

6:1-4 "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. So whenever you give alms, 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. 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."

One of my best friends often jokes with me and says, "if you didn't post it, it didn't happen."

How many of us believe this to be true? Interestingly enough though, the author of our lectionary text admonishes readers to save some secrets for GOD. In contrast to much of the Gospel of Matthew that is about confirmations of miracles, and identifying evidential proof of Jesus' ministry, in this portion of the text the author not only discourages outward signs of piety, but rather suggests that practicing the religious customs of the day in an ostentatious manner provides the doer with rewards that can block the path of GOD's rewards. Validation chasers rarely receive Divine favor.

Are there areas of our personal lives that we have given too many people access to? Do we support the mission of the church in hopeful anticipation that our efforts will be publicly celebrated? What are our motivations for desires of public validation?

As we enter this Lenten season, let us reflect on the areas of our lives that we need to restrict others from gaining access to. Let us check our motives and needs for external validation. We just might find that we have some behaviors that are unwittingly blocking the flow of Divine favor as we perform our faith before others. Which leads me to the second point.

Point #2: Private rituals can produce public rewards.

6:17-18 "But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

Before COVID, in the years I served as Senior Pastor, I can recall looking forward to dipping my finger in some consecrated olive oil and the ashes from the previous year's palm branches that I had incinerated in the weeks leading up to the Lenten season. My clergy friends and I would post photos bearing the dark marks on our foreheads where we had shared in blessing one another with the sign

of the cross. Some of my members would come to the church office before heading to work and others would be sure to make either noonday Bible Study or evening service so they could receive a blessing from their pastor to mark the beginning of the Lenten season.

This year will be different for many of us. There will be few services of imposition of ashes. Some of us may choose to anoint ourselves and members of our own household, while taking part in Zoom or Facebook Live, or some other digital communal worship experience. But for the most part, we won't touch. We won't have the public experiences that mark this season.

I want to encourage you that private rituals can produce public rewards. As the Gospel writer records, your Father who sees in secret will reward you. So, no, we do not have to worry about having ashes produced from palm branches from two years ago. We do not even have to worry about publicly declaring if, what, and how we are fasting. In the words of YouTube sensation Tabitha Brown, "that's your business." If you choose to fast, if you choose to anoint yourself, in this season, lean into the private time with GOD and see if it might not yield the fruit of a closer relationship with the One who sees you in secret.

Finally, friends, this Lenten season is different than times past. For many of us last year's Ash Wednesday services marked one of the last corporate worship experiences we can recall sharing with our congregations before the world changed.

So much of what we thought was important then and things that we thought we just could not do without, COVID has shown us that so little of what we treasured then really matter now. My final point is that in this Lenten season, we must **take time to treasure what matters**.

Point #3: Take time to treasure what matters.

6:19-21 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

When I was growing up one of my favorite songs was by a group named Shalamar. The lyrics of the song began like this:

When you love someone, it's natural, not demanding
And that's one thing I'm proud to say I've found in you
I'm so glad we reached an understanding
Now I know my heart is safe with you, ooh
So now my love to you, baby, I surrender
Get ready, tonight
Gonna make this a night to remember
Get ready, oh, baby, tonight
Gonna make this a night to remember¹

Now, I know that Shalamar was talking about being engrossed in love and preparing to express that love in a night of something memorable that we tend not to talk about much in church. And before you stop reading this sermon that is not a sermon to be read, I want to encourage you to imagine what the next forty days might be like if you sang a love song to GOD like this. How might you and GOD partner in re-member-ing pieces of you? Pieces of you that perhaps you let go of when you were trying to be what others wanted you to be? Perhaps pieces of you that you abandoned the first time someone made you feel unworthy? Perhaps pieces of you that you sacrificed so you could focus on supporting a family or shepherding a church, or stewarding a profession? What if you spent the next forty days redeeming the time and identifying what is worth treasuring?

Friends, I do not know what your life is like as we head into this liturgical season of Lent. I do not know if you have lost loved ones or if your employment situation has been disrupted by the pandemics. I do not know if you are wrestling with the decision to be vaccinated, if you are on your second dose, or if you are completely against the idea of vaccinations. I do not know if you have missed the assembling together of the saints as Habakkuk suggests we ought not forsake, if your church has been prayerfully gathering in person, or if you have given up on corporate worship altogether. In the grand scheme of things though, I do know that some things matter more than others. Lent gives us an opportunity to reacquaint ourselves with what really matters.

¹ Dana L. Meyers, Nidra Elizabeth Beard, Charmaine Elaine Sylvers, *A Night to Remember*, BMG Rights Management, 1982.

As we prepare to intentionally enter these next forty days, I want to invite each of us to ask GOD to reveal to us what we should be treasuring.

I have a hunch that those things are probably not things. I imagine that which deserves to be treasured will be difficult to quantify in mathematical metrics. I surmise that the treasures that GOD will reveal to you and I in this Lenten season will be close to our hearts and if we are open to it, they will strengthen our resolve to live into a season to re-member.

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