

253 Ashes for Wednesday

(Note: This blog entry is based on the text "Ashes for Wednesday", originally shared on February 22, 2023. It was the 253^d video for our YouTube Channel, Streams of Living Water (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCB7KnYS1bpHKaL2OseQWCnw>), co-produced with my wife, Rev. Sally Welch.)

Wednesday Addams, of The Addams Family, has experienced a popular resurgence in the dark, coming-of-age, supernatural-comedy-horror-mystery show "Wednesday" now streaming on Netflix. There are aspects of Ash Wednesday that would please her. There are also aspects that would bring her, and us, hope. Today, we're going to find out what they are.

Some of us might remember the TV Show "The Addams Family" that ran from 1964 to 1977. It was based on cartoons in the New Yorker magazine and has had many re-boots. Netflix is currently streaming a very popular show based on the daughter in that family called "Wednesday".

Today is Ash Wednesday. I imagine that Ash Wednesday might be attractive to Wednesday Addams for its, well, ashes, its consideration of death, and its repudiation of hypocrisy.

The Gospel reading is from the words of Jesus to the crowds in the Sermon on the Mount in **Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**,

6¹ "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.

2"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. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

5"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. ⁶But 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.

16"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. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your

face, ¹⁸so 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.

¹⁹Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The reading begins with these words, in **verse 1**,

"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.

Jesus then warns against giving alms (money given to the poor after your offerings) to make yourself look good, and against praying in public to make yourself look good, and against making a suffering-face when you fast for religious reasons in order to make yourself look good. He warns against trusting in your accumulated wealth but instead advocates for giving it away to send it to heaven so that your heart might be in the right place.

We read and hear these things, and then we put ashes right on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday and wear them in front of each other!

Now, most of us will be going straight home after an evening service, but some of us will get our ashes earlier in the day and wear them everywhere we go. Either way, we wear them in front of each other, right after we have heard Jesus say,

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.

But wait a minute. Let's look a little closer at those verses.

Each one of Jesus' warnings is not about our actions, but about our motivation for those actions, not about our what's but about the why's behind them.

When we act "in order to be seen by them", or "so that they may be praised by others", or "so that they may be seen by others", or "so as to show others" we are acting to serve ourselves.

Is it wrong to give money, or pray, or deny ourselves, or even to accumulate wealth? Yes, when we do it for ourselves, and not to glorify God. We are spiritually poor when we are not materially rich toward others.

You may have seen the news reports about the spy balloon sent to float over our country by the Chinese government a couple of weeks ago. I saw many responses

online. I saw a sign in a parking lot right after the balloon was shot down that said, "Balloon rides cancelled until further notice." I saw a meme that showed a flying cow balloon being sent aloft with the text, "Wisconsin has just launched its spy balloon over Minnesota," a picture of the Goodyear Blimp showing the message, "DON'T SHOOT!" And, I saw a photo from inside a car that said, "I followed the spy balloon for two hours until I realized that it was just bird poop on my windshield."

We can't always tell what a thing is by looking at it. Seeing is not always believing, but sometimes believing is a way of seeing. And sometimes believing is the only way to see what is real. Appearances are not what the Christian life is about. Faith is what the Christian life is about.

Lent starts today. Lent is the 40 days between Ash Wednesday and Easter, excluding Sundays, which are like little Easters. Lent is a season to reflect on living the Christian life, and in turning that reflection into action.

What we learn in Lent is that the Christian life does not consist in acting in the right way; that would just be living under the religious Law. The Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, is that we are set free from the Law to live in response to the love that God shows us in the death of Jesus Christ, who was fully God and fully a human being, on the cross. The paradox of the Christian life is that we truly keep the Law when it defines who we are, not in what we do. When we live as a new Creation. Motivation is everything.

Jesus even warns us not to "store up for yourselves treasures on earth." Why? Isn't that the responsible thing to do?

Jesus warns against accumulating wealth because we tend to put it at the center of our lives and put our trust in it and not in God. We tend hoard it and to not be generous. And, in Jesus' day, many people believed that if you had a lot of money, it was because you were a good person and God had blessed you, so you wanted to hang onto your money.

Jesus says that the Christian life is about a living relationship with the one true living God, lived out in response to the great grace God has already given us in Jesus Christ. We don't live to impress others with our goodness. We live as the new creations God has made us to be.

We are blessed, but we are blessed to be a blessing, not to show off our righteousness or to serve ourselves.

That's why Jesus can also say, as we read a couple of weeks ago in **Matthew 5:16**, after talking about how we light our rooms by putting our lamps on a lamppost and not under a basket,

"In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

It's not the actions that Jesus condemns, it's their motivation. In the Christian life, faith produces and defines our actions. We don't do what we do to impress others with our spirituality, we do them because that is who we are. It is as natural for us to do them as it is natural for an orange tree to bear oranges.

We see in the ashes of Ash Wednesday creation and decomposition from Adam and Eve, humility from Abraham before God, and sorrow from Jeremiah over the coming destruction of Jerusalem.

But we also see in ashes a sign. The ashes are placed on our foreheads in the sign of the cross, a sign of our salvation, on the same spot and with the same shape placed on our foreheads at our baptism, and with the declaration that we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.

The character Wednesday Addams might see destruction and death in ashes, but we see something else: the restoration of life as it was intended to be lived from the very beginning. The victory of the cross over everything that defies God.

On Ash Wednesday, we have the sign of the cross drawn on our foreheads in ashes. From nothing comes everything: the cross of Jesus Christ given, the hope of the world.