

In Secret
First UMC of Pocatello
Ash Wednesday
March 2, 2022

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

In 1936, the British Catholic writer Evelyn Underhill shared the following words over a public radio broadcast about Christian spirituality:

“We mostly spend [our] lives conjugating three verbs: to Want, to Have, and to Do. Craving, clutching, and fussing, on the material, political, social, emotional, intellectual – even on the religious – plane, we are kept in perpetual unrest: forgetting that none of these verbs have any ultimate significance, except so far as they are transcended by and included in, the fundamental verb, to Be: and that Being, not wanting, having and doing, is the essence of a spiritual life.”¹

The mark of ashes we will soon receive is a reminder of our mortality. No amount of wanting, having, and doing can prepare us for the inescapable dust-to-dust journey we all must someday make. Only *being* – resting, abiding – can do that. Yet even with death ever in view, there is a vital connection for us between learning to let go *finally* and learning to live *fully*. They are one and the same journey. Along the way, we confront the inner knot of voices, cravings, and anxieties that sap our energy and compel us endlessly to Want, to Have, to Do. Lent is a time to squarely face this “perpetual unrest” and to practice the art of being – being with Christ and in Christ, consenting to Christ’s being in us and through us.

¹ Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life: Four Broadcast Talks* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2013), 24.

Jesus addresses the challenge of being in his Sermon on the Mount. He lifts up three habits (or what we might call today spiritual disciplines) that get at the root of wanting, having, and doing.

To address wanting, Jesus says, *fast*. Put off the satisfaction of your immediate desire.

To address having, *give*. Don't presume possession of things; let them pass freely through your fingers.

To address doing, *pray*. "Go into your room and shut the door."

When we give something up in fasting, when we give something away in alms, when we give of our attention to God in prayer – we are rehearsing the unhindered, unhurried, truly *present* life which is life at its fullest. This is the "reward" from our Heavenly Father of which Jesus speaks. When we let ourselves simply *be*, responsive to whatever the Spirit asks of us, we become less vulnerable to the shifting sands of circumstance. Our hands, our hearts, our time, and our attention are *free*.

To the acts of fasting, giving, and praying, Jesus adds an overall command to secrecy. He knows how easy it is for us to disguise our compulsions in religious activity. We need to be on guard against turning them into expressions of those same ego-indulging verbs – wanting, having, doing.

Our efforts at fasting, though aimed at relieving the compulsion to *want*, might tempt us to *want* a reputation as pious, sacrificial people. Our efforts at giving, though aimed at relieving the compulsion to *have*, might tempt us to *possess* the gratitude, esteem, indebtedness of those we help. Our efforts at praying, though aimed at relieving the compulsion to *do*, might tempt us to *produce* results that we can trot out before others as proof of our holiness.

Jesus had been pressured to make a public spectacle of himself by his own family. Here's how John's Gospel reports the aftermath to the feeding of the crowd of 5,000:

“[H]is brothers said to him, ‘Leave here and go to Judea so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing; for no one who wants to be widely known acts in secret. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.’ ...Jesus said to them, ‘My time has not yet come...’ ...After saying this, he remained in Galilee.”²

Even for Jesus, there was a *time to remain, to be*, which preceded the *time to come*. So, his teaching is this: Do all the things. Fast, pray, give. But do them secretly. Hide the signs. Don't even pay too much attention to yourself. Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Then, God will reward you.

The late American poet, Mary Oliver, once wrote, “The patterns of our lives reveal us. Our habits measure us. Our battles with our habits speak to dreams yet to become real.”³ It is the patterns, not the outcomes, which reveal who we are. For the follower of Christ, it is the secret battles of fasting, giving, and praying that speak to God our highest dream and most precious desire, which, happily, is the very same as God's dream for us: “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death” (Phil. 3:10).

The secrecy – it hurts, it costs. But it also hollows us out and sets us free. Our attention is free to shift from the acts themselves, or the results of the acts, or how people perceive us in our acting, to what is happening inside us when we do them, our probable resistance, our promised joy, our growing surrender to the movements of grace.

² John 7:3-4, 6, 9.

³ Mary Oliver, *Long Life: Essays and Other Writings* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2004).

So, friends, I invite us all to journey this Lent into such secrecy, to submit ourselves to Christ, who calls each of us, within our own unique circumstances, to discover what it means to abstain rather than satisfy, to give rather than possess, to pray rather than do. The reward is a greater-than-the-grave quality of life, the life of Christ himself dwelling in us richly.

Amen.