

“The Path of Humility”***Isaiah 58.1–12 & Matthew 6.1–6******The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, Ash Wednesday 2007***

We in the Congregational strand of the United Church tradition have never been much for PDPs...public displays of piety. Perhaps that’s because we and our forbears have read these two texts from Isaiah and Matthew, seriously and continually. That isn’t to say that we don’t practice a sense of religious devotion; we do! We don’t shout about the ways we practice our faith, and if anything, we need to err on the side of not hiding our light under a bushel basket.

Having a smudge of ash imposed on one’s forehead would have seemed like a very Catholic thing to do a generation ago in the UCC, and there are still churches, like the one I belonged to in Connecticut, where it is not done, because it feels to some like a PDP. (Interestingly, we can’t get through to the Coloradoan that our church has an Ash Wednesday service, and that it isn’t just a Catholic-Episcopalian-Lutheran thing.)

Piety, like sexuality, is intimate. It is something that goes on between one’s soul and God. And it doesn’t seem fitting to the author of Matthew’s gospel to wear piety on your sleeve. Jesus’ words in Matthew evoke a very private relationship that connects people with their creator. We aren’t meant to shout on the street corners when we pray – which doesn’t mean that we can’t pray in the presence of others – but it does seem to suggest that we pray for the right reason: to deepen our relationship with God.

Have you ever overheard a conversation between someone using a cell phone and another party, and recoiled because you’re hearing a lot more than you’d really like to be hearing about the intimate details of someone’s life? Sometimes that is the way I feel when I watch televangelists pray. There is a kind of voyeurism that accompanies some televangelists purporting to have live encounters with God on screen. (It isn’t about God; it’s about the televangelist.)

I think what Jesus is doing is counseling us to use a phone booth – rather than use a cell phone in a restaurant – when we want to have a private conversation with God. “Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father, who is in secret.”

It is not the case that we should be ashamed to pray, but rather that we should treat prayer with the reverence due to an intimate relationship. Just as we develop emotional maturity in our relations with others, so we develop spiritual maturity in our relationship with God through prayer: both speaking and listening. It takes time, and it takes time apart with God.



It takes a sense of humility to acknowledge that we, all of us, are spiritual infants...that we don’t have all the answers, and that we sometimes wander in a seemingly aimless manner as we search for connection with the divine.

And humility – groundedness – is what Jesus counsels for our journey. We need to be able to admit that we’re going to get it wrong sometimes, that we’re going to stumble, that we are imperfect images of a divine creator.

There will be times when we are in our own wilderness, confronting our own personal demons. And part of the message of the Lenten journey is that we can go ahead and move toward our fears and even suffering, because we know that we will make it through the darkest of nights and see a new dawn.

It is counterintuitive for us to move toward suffering, but part of the good news is that we can move toward it, through it, and beyond it in the company of Christ, and in the company of each other.

May our Lenten journeys be blessed by the fellowship of this community and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.