

Year A, March 1, 2017
Ash Wednesday
Christ Church, Mexia

The Rev. Charles Hoffacker reminds us that: "The poet Robert Bridges was experiencing difficulties in matters of faith. He read many books of theology. He spent hours in reflection. Yet he found himself unable to believe in God. He wrote to another poet, his friend Gerald Manley Hopkins, asking for advice. Hopkins wrote back this terse reply: 'Give alms.'

Give alms. In other words, Robert Bridges, don't sit there alone with your doubts and your theology books. Reach into your pocket, pull out your wallet, and give away your money, your precious money, so that the hungry can be fed and the homeless housed, so that the ignorant can learn and the sick be helped back to health. If you have trouble believing in God, then don't stew in your own thoughts, but act as though you already believe. Give alms, and the little you lose will be far exceeded by what you gain. Hopkins advice to his friend must have done some good. Bridges became ardent in his faith."

This is good advice for us also as we begin our Lenten journey this year. Jesus reminded us in the gospel reading tonight of the three practices that are central to our Christian religion: prayer, fasting and giving of alms. And each of these are important, but before talking about them individually, let me make a couple of general points first.

To begin, we tend now to focus on the 40 days of Lent, our bounden duty if you will, when, in fact, we should be living our lives in the same way we focus our attention during Lent. As Maryetta Anschutz puts it: "The danger in Lent is that we go through the motions of discipline without learning how to live Lent. The danger is that we do everything 'right' but never ask ourselves how 'right' behavior changes how we live our lives."

And this brings me to another point. Is not the entire message of the Sermon on the Mount which we have been hearing and discussing these past few weeks, do unto others as you would have them do unto you? Isn't it? And the emphasis here is on "do." I am convinced by my years of teaching and reading that cognition, thinking, does not change our behavior. On the other hand, doing things differently will most likely change the way we think about them. For example, A.J. Jacobs, a self-proclaimed agnostic, decided to live by strict religious

rules for a year in New York City. Afterwards, he wrote a book about his experience entitled *The Year of Living Biblically*. What Jacobs discovered led not to a radical conversion, but rather a genuine openness to faith. Having lived in that way, he could think about life and God differently – he saw the world differently than he had before.

In part, he learned to pray in ways that only God could hear. He learned to talk intimately with God and to ask himself some of the questions Jesus asks of his disciples. Public prayer, as we do here in our services has its place and is a good thing, without question, but we also need those moments of privacy and intimacy with God. And Br. Braught (SSJE) admonishes us to ask God daily to show us ways to serve – to provide opportunities to serve others. He also asks God to make it “crystal clear,” so he won’t miss it – because he feels he is sometimes “not that quick.” Ask in your way – the way that fits you and your relationship with God, but do pray regularly and often – during Lent and thereafter.

Almsgiving is and always has been an important aspect of our faith. In today’s culture with an emphasis on self, of which selfies is but a small confirmation of my point, – and by the way do you know that there is a selfie-toaster on the market? You take your picture, download it to the toaster and your face image is toasted onto the bread! Really? But I digress – almsgiving helps us to recognize the need of others – it gets us away from self – and it also contributes to our humility because we almost always soon realize that we don’t have the means to solve the problem, whatever it is, by ourselves. We cannot do it alone; we need the church, we need relationships or partnerships with many others, if we are to make a real and lasting difference at all.

Fasting will hopefully lead us to a discovery about things on which we are subtly dependent and also to help us realize that so many people in this world fast every day, not for religious reasons, but rather because they are fortunate if they can afford one meal a day, and/or have access to clean water. Fasting reminds us of what a phenomenal life style we enjoy – far more than just daily bread for us.

And Jesus asks us to do these three things not for show, for our earthly reward or recognition, but for God – our love of God. I believe I have mentioned my uncle, Mac, to you before. He was the husband of my mother’s older sister, and an Episcopalian by the way. He was a generous man in so many ways – we all knew that by the things we saw him do virtually every day – not that he did it for us to see. He

and my aunt attended an Episcopal church in an old downtown neighborhood that was mostly populated in their later years by people living in poverty, and many of the neighborhood children attended the church's school, where they could not only receive a good education, but also the other things they needed like food, love and encouragement. It was only after his death that the priest informed my aunt that he had almost single-handedly financed that school for many years. She, despite their closeness, had no idea. I thank God often for his loving and generous example in my life.

Jesus reminds us to give alms, pray and fast – but to do so as privately as possible. We are not to accumulate earthly goods or wealth. “But the world says, prepare for the worst. Secure your borders. Hoard your money and hide it under your bed. Avoid the stranger. Take care of your own and one day he or she will take care of you. Jesus says, prepare for the best. Live expansive lives. Give generously. Engage the stranger. Care for the needy. As country singer George Strait reminds us, ‘The hearse doesn’t come with a luggage rack.’ (Anschutz) You can’t take it with you.

So during this Lent, I invite you to live differently. Do something you don’t ordinarily do, maybe something that “conventional wisdom” or others say not to do, and see if it makes a difference in your life, the way you think about life. See if it leads you to live differently thereafter.

In the name of the One God - the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.

Amen.