

## ASH WEDNESDAY

**Scripture:** Matthew 6: 1-6 and 16-18

**By:** Fr. Bob Schmitz

**Text:** That Gospel is a cut-and-paste job that changes its meaning. Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer is snipped from the middle of the passage. As read, the passage is about MY private piety, MY almsgiving, prayer-life, fasting. When we include the Lord's Prayer as Matthew intended, our minds rise to our Father God, to God's Kingdom, and God's will. Coming before God, we gain perspective. Mirrored back to us are both our weaknesses and the love that emanates from God. Knowing both our weakness and God's saving love opens our hearts to transformation, to real change. A spiritual life, after all, should be about God coming into our lives to transform our lives.

Perspective is crucial. Each of us needs awareness of our weaknesses and we need to recall the love that saves us. Our souls raise pressing questions: Where do I fit into the vast universe? Is my life significant? How will I be judged? Cutting God out of the picture leaves us to ourselves, stumbling around without answers. The worst development ensues when we think we are alone at the center of it all. Self-absorption results when we edit God out of our lives.

A recent commercial, one perfect for our culture, features a young boy wearing a bowtie saying he wants to be the CEO of his own life. The commercial borrows from a set of such statements: *I want to be the lead actor in my own drama*. One philosopher said: *I am the hero in my own saga*. To cut our Father God out of the picture leaves us to think we are the center of existence. Ash Wednesday says such self-absorption does not ring true.

Restore the Our Father to the passage and we have our lives merging into God's plan. God is the CEO, the hero, the lead actor. God creates and God saves. God is the core of

existence and the source of goodness. God is the guarantor of truth and the spring of beauty. God forgives; God is mercy; God is the love we all need in our life.

I do not want this day to discourage anyone. But the ashes we wear indicate that we are not the center of existence; we are not even the lead actor in our own story. I know it is difficult to become aware of our weaknesses. The all-powerful God makes us feel frail. The all-knowing God compels us to admit our ignorance. The Creator of all things reminds us of our dependence. Even so!...Even so!...Proper perspective does not diminish us. God is our Father who intends our salvation. God's Kingdom is near at hand. We can do God's will on earth as it is in heaven. In today's second reading St. Paul said: "We are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us."

I would like to introduce a phrase for Lent, *sacrificial discipleship*. The word *sacrificial* is derived from Latin. Let me admit I was a terrible student at Latin, hated every moment I studied it. Sacrifice is not about giving up some minor part of my life, avoiding desserts or chocolate, or declining a glass of wine or my favorite cocktail. *Sacrifice* comes from two Latin words that combined means *to make holy*. It is what God is doing to us and for us, how God is transforming us. St. Peter instructed us like this: "But ...[God]...called you to be holy; be holy yourselves in every aspect of your conduct, for it is written, "Be holy because I [God] am holy." (1Peter 1:15/16)

Now this is where the homily should offer practical advice. But today you need your inner room with a closed door—as the Gospel says. You alone know what part of your life needs to become holy. You may need the all-knowing God to move you to study one of today's vexing, often-debated problems—say, immigration. With God and study, we can find truth—

and truth is holy. We can live in the Creator God by our care of the good earth. Caring for creation is holy. We can live in the all-good God by bringing the goodness out of others, particularly those who differ with us. Mutual understanding is holy. We can participate in the all-powerful God by becoming an active part in our community. We can live in the all-holy God by expanding the causes for which we pray, say, increased compassion and empathy. You may need a new cause for your charity—the homeless or the hungry. Charity is always holy.

Sacrificial discipleship means we are advancing God's cause on earth as it is in heaven. Go to that inner room and close the door; put yourself in God's presence, gain perspective. And know God wants to appeal through you.