

February 10, 2016 (Ash Wednesday)

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Old Testament Lesson: Joel 2:12-18

¹²Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. ¹⁴Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord, your God? ¹⁵Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; ¹⁶gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy. ¹⁷Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep. Let them say, "Spare your people, O Lord, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, "Where is their God?""

¹⁸Then the Lord became jealous for his land, and had pity on his people.

Epistle Lesson: 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2

²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

⁶As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ²For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

Gospel Lesson: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

⁶"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.

¹⁹“Do 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 Gospel of the Lord!

Sermon:

In November of 1993, BJ Miller returned to Princeton University after his Thanksgiving break. He was a sophomore and had taken to college life quickly, forming this tight-knit little group of friends that seemed like his whole world. That’s why they met up late at night that first day back at school. They didn’t have any big plans, Miller remembered later – they just loved hanging out with each other. They picked up sub sandwiches from the Wawa Convenience Store and started ambling across campus like they owned the place.

If you’ve been to Princeton, you might know that there is this little commuter rail train with a single car that shuttles people back and forth

from the campus to the larger route that runs between New York and Philadelphia. People around Princeton call this little caboose “The Dinky.” The Dinky was closed for the night, just parked at the end of the train tracks in the darkness. It was approaching midnight but not too cold and they decided to eat their sandwiches on the top of the train. There was a little ladder with rungs that ran to the roof of the train car and BJ happened to climb it first.

When he stepped onto the roof of the train car, his watch grazed a power line that sent 11,000 volts of electricity racing through his body. He heard a boom and saw a wave of white light and then: nothing.

When he finally regained consciousness, a week had passed. He was laying in a hospital bed covered in tubes and wires. He was severely burned and had nearly died. Both of his legs had already been amputated below the knees, along with one of his arms.

“What I mostly remember is waking up,” says Miller “and feeling the way you do when coming out of a bad dream. But when I jumped out of the hospital bed, ripping all the tubes out of me, trying to walk, and falling in a heap on the floor, I realized that the nightmare had actually been true.”¹

For this handsome, intelligent man who was already thriving in the Ivy League, this incident was not just the destruction of his body. It was also the obliteration of a certain kind of perfect life. The life he had imagined, worked for, even begun to achieve – it all turned on a dime when he reached the top of that ladder.

The change happened so fast. The realization and acceptance of the change happened much slower.

I’ve been mulling over BJ Miller and his story as I sit with Jesus’ teachings from Matthew 6, from the Sermon on the Mount. It’s a

¹ BJ Miller ’93: Wounded Healer. From “The Princeton Alumni Weekly,” February 5, 2014.

powerful text but I think we have to admit that this is a strange lesson for Ash Wednesday.

You know, we, the church, sometimes get a reputation for making people feel guilty. I'd like to say that this is an unfair reputation, that we're getting painted with this broad religious brush, but then I look at this Scripture reading in light of what we are about to do here.

"Whenever you pray," says Jesus, "go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret."

"Whenever you fast," says Jesus, "do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Rather, when you fast, put oil on your hair and wash your face."

So tonight we read a text like that before asking you, the congregation, to walk down the aisle and receive a smear of dust and ashes across your forehead for all the world to see, then say prayers in public, and then send you out the doors saying, "Go in peace!"

Is that a mixed message or what? Is Jesus encouraging us back into the closets of our personal piety on *this* particular holy day – this one day of the year when many of us opt to wear our faith on our sleeve, or our forehead, as it were?

I think it's a little more complicated than that. It's helpful to pair Matthew 6 with the even more ancient words from prophet Joel.

We return to Joel year after year during Lent because Joel's writings are a call to repentance. Joel's times, like our times, were a little dire. He wrote to the people in the midst of an unprecedented plague of locusts. All around him, people were suffering. All around him, people were asking the question, "Where is their God?" and the people were tipping towards despair.

That's when they received these words from the prophet, as hopeful as they are challenging:

“Even now, says the LORD, return to me...rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to your God who is gracious and merciful, and slow to anger.”

Rend your hearts and not your clothing. In some essential way, Jesus and Joel are both trying to say that returning to God means making your insides look like your outsides.

I think that’s a beautiful notion. But as anyone who has done work in therapy can tell you – it is not as easy as it sounds!

Miller spent a lot of time in hospital beds in those first few months after the accident. He had a lot of time to think and process the changes that were happening to him – more time than anyone might ever want, really.

Certain changes were obvious, abrupt, and immediate. He would never walk on his own two feet again. He would temporarily withdraw from school. He would give up his spot on the crew team. But other changes took place more slowly, over time. He found that in addition to his physical recovery, his injury had triggered enormous existential questions. Was he going to live his life in opposition to his injury, in frantic pursuit of the life he thought he was going to live? Or was he going to learn to embrace his “new body” as he came to call it? “The gift [my new body] gave me,” he said years later, “was that it got me out of the habit of thinking about the future and comparing myself to others. It rammed me into the present moment.”

Eventually, Miller re-enrolled at Princeton. He arrived while learning to walk on carbon-fiber prosthetic legs that looked bionic and futuristic. The doctors gave him these strange foam cases to wrap around his prostheses so that they would look more like human legs, but after a while he threw them away. “I pulled the covers off my legs,” he said, “and started to force myself to genuinely delight in these weird structures that are now my legs. I love these legs. These legs aren’t some cheap imitation of what I lost. These are wholly new things.”²

² “Reframing Our Relationship To That We Don’t Control.” An interview with BJ Miler from “On Being with Krista Tippett.” January 28, 2016. www.onbeing.org.

“Whenever you pray,” says Jesus, “don’t be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray...so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have already received their reward.”

It’s clear enough what Jesus is saying here, but it was helpful for me to dig into the etymology of the word “hypocrite.” The word finds its origins in the Greek word, “hupokrisis,” which simply refers to an actor. An actor on the stage in Jesus’ day might have proudly adopted the title of “hypocrite,” one who plays a part. In the secular Greek literature of the day, the word has both neutral and negative overtones. But Jesus uses the word 18 different times in the Gospels, and always with a negative connotation.³ Hypocrites, as far as Jesus is concerned, are people who misrepresent themselves for the sake of social gain. To make a long story short, their insides do not match their outsides. And this, to Jesus, is a spiritual problem.

Like an actor on the stage, a hypocrite is hungry for the roar of audience applause. When that applause arrives, Jesus warns, they have received their reward in full. And indeed, what good does that applause do you when you return home, when you remove the mask, when you take the foam covers off your legs, revealing something that no one ever sees?

See, I think it’s a mistake to think that Jesus is exhorting us to secret prayer. I think it’s more likely that Jesus is calling us to authentic prayer. Humble prayer. Prayer that starts by acknowledging our faults and failings. Prayer that reconciles us to God, and then ourselves, and then the world. Such prayer is powerful because it begins in a very interior, very honest place and flows outward.

Right now our country is soaking in bloviating, opportunistic, self-righteous God-talk. It’s a bi-partisan problem, if we’re honest – and God help us, the South Carolina primaries are right around the corner. We’ve got more than enough actors on the stage right now. But we are

³ Etymology of “Hypocrite,” from the Wycliffe Bible Dictionary (Editor: Charles Pfeifer). www.bibleone.net.

in terrible need of prayer that comes from a place of humble recognition of our human limits.

A word that BJ Miller uses a lot these days is ‘proportionality.’ How do we reframe our understanding of ourselves, our understanding of the world around us, in an honest way that will bring us peace?

He had to do the hard work of acknowledging and accepting that his legs and his arms were gone. He could no more deny this loss than he could deny his entire existence. But – he discovered - on the far side of that acceptance lay a renewed sense of possibility.

“I’ve lost these body parts,” he said recently in an interview. “Does that make me less of a person? By volume, yes. But not in any other way.” Before the accident, he said, “I was a kind of melancholy child. My internal world didn’t quite match with my external world, is one way you could put it. But this radical change to my body really, in a way, offered this great excuse to refashion my perspective, to refashion and compose my sense of self.”⁴

After Princeton, Miller went to medical school, and although he flirted with the idea of working in rehab with amputees like himself, he ultimately settled on hospice care – medical care for the actively dying patient and their family.

Why hospice? Because as he would say, death is the great unifier. For many of us, it is only at death’s door that we find the courage to talk honestly about our limits, our losses, our lacking. At death’s door, each of us is disabled. At death’s door, we have a profound opportunity to experience grace.

The tragedy of the hypocrite, I believe, is not their dishonesty but their loneliness. What good is the roar of a thousand audiences if you cannot bring yourself to share your flawed and broken heart with another soul?

⁴ “Reframing Our Relationship To That We Don’t Control.” An interview with BJ Miler from “On Being with Krista Tippett.” January 28, 2016. www.onbeing.org.

What good are these miraculous bionic legs if they are always hidden, wrapped up in dreams of a more normal life?

This is the profound opportunity at the heart of Ash Wednesday, I believe. It's not as morbid as it might seem, this practice of reminding ourselves, visibly and verbally of our own inevitable death. We pray to God in secret so that we can flow from that honest place into a community of healing and justice and love.

We confront our sin, our loss, our brokenness, trusting that there is new life on the other side of that honesty.

We walk this Lenten path to the Cross, trusting that approaching death is - in the end - the only way to Resurrection.

It begins here, friends, as uncomfortable as it may seem. So be brave. Be honest. Return to God with an open heart. Even now, it is not too late.