

Practicing for Easter Joy

February 25, 2009

(Ash Wednesday - Year B)

Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

As some of you know, my wife, Susan, was in Providence Hospital yesterday for surgery to have her appendix removed. She is doing fine now and I appreciate all of your care and concern for her.

However, Susan's stay at Providence Hospital enabled me to spend the better part of Shrove Tuesday at the hospital. Shrove Tuesday, as we call it in the Episcopal Church, is the day before Lent begins, the day before Ash Wednesday. In other traditions, yesterday is also referred to as Fat Tuesday, or by its French name, Mardi Gras.

At Providence Hospital yesterday, the staff at the hospital went all out to celebrate Mardi Gras.

The lunch menu in the hospital cafeteria was changed to Mardi Gras fare, such as jambalaya and crawfish.

And, everywhere you went, nurses and staff members handed out Mardi Gras beads to patients and visitors, to wear around their necks.

When I was in the hospital cafeteria waiting in line for my breakfast, I was standing next to two young nurses, who appeared to be in their 20s.

One was a male nurse, the other a female nurse.

They looked like they had just stepped off the set of the TV show *Grey's Anatomy* and they were obviously flirting with each other.

The female nurse took some of her Mardi Gras beads off of her own neck and put them around the neck of the male nurse, in a public display of affection.

The guy then asked her:

“Why are you giving me your beads to wear?”

She replied, with a twinkle in her eye:

“So you can celebrate Fat Tuesday with me.”

He then asked:

“What’s the deal about Fat Tuesday any way?”

To which she replied:

“You know, it’s Mardi Gras, like in New Orleans.”

Immediately, the young man’s eyes lit up - as visions of a New Orleans Mardi Gras danced in his head.

He then gave the girl a slight kiss on the cheek.

Then she added:

“You know, it’s the day before Ash Wednesday, the day when Lent starts.”

He pulled away from her a bit and asked:

“What’s Lent about, anyway?”

And this young female nurse replied:

“You know - it’s when people give up chocolate and drinking beer and stuff like that.”

Immediately, the playful and flirtatious demeanor of this young man turned into a scowl.

And from his face, I could imagine exactly what he was thinking.

The mention of the word ‘Lent’ - or of the word ‘Christianity’ - was an instant killjoy for him.

For the Christianity that he knew was all about no chocolate, no beer, no sex, no fun, no joy whatsoever.

As I watched the interchange between these flirting young nurses, I saw on that young man’s face - that Lent - and Christianity - suffers from an image problem.

Because, to the rest of the world, we have somehow mis-communicated that Lent and Christianity has everything to do with rigid rules - and has nothing to do with joy.

In the reading from the Gospel of Matthew that we heard today, Jesus tells us to beware.

Jesus tells us to beware of making a big show out of our spiritual disciplines and practices.

Jesus tells us to beware of focusing on exterior things, when we should be focusing on our interior spiritual lives.

And, my guess is, that if Jesus were talking to us today, he would also tell us to beware of making Christianity all about the rules, rather than about joyful relationships.

Jesus would tell us to beware of making the world think that Christianity is just about giving up beer or chocolate.

For Lent is not about rules.

Lent is an incredible time of joy for us to grow closer to God and to each other.

Lent is not about focusing just on sin and the ways that we have broken our relationships with God and each other.

Lent is also a time for us to focus on the joy of being forgiven of our sins.

This is not to say that Lent - and Christianity - does not involve hard work and difficult choices.

But it is to say that we have lost our way when the Christian faith and life is simply seen as a laundry list of things that we are *not* supposed to do.

When, really, being a Christian is more about the things that we *are* supposed to do, things such as:

Love your enemies.

Pray every day.

Give money to the poor.

Be quick to love and make haste to be kind.

For these are the things that bring us true joy.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says:

“When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face.”

Two thousand years ago, when Jesus made this statement, the act of putting oil on your head was an act of joy and gladness.

And I imagine that, along the same lines, Jesus would have told those

two young nurses that I saw in the hospital cafeteria:
“When you observe Lent, put Mardi Gras beads around your neck and
keep on flirting.”

Lent is in need of an image make over.

Lent is not about exteriors and about saying ‘no’ to Blue Bell ice cream.

Lent is about working on our interior spiritual lives.

Lent is about practicing - practicing for the joy of Easter.

So keep those Mardi Gras beads around your neck.

And join me - as we practice for Easter joy.

AMEN.

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