

Ash Wednesday
Matthew 6:1-21
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There are several versions of the emergence of moral improvement as the *sin qua non* of the Christian faith in our time.¹ Karl Barth thinks he can pin it down to Germany in the eighteenth century, among Protestants.² Characterizing several teachers and pastors of the era, Barth writes,

As a taste of his [Karl Friedrich Bahrdt] style, I quote some of his New Testament paraphrases. Matthew 3.2³: ‘Improve yourselves.’ . . . Again and again in his [Johan Salomon Semler] writings one comes across the presupposition, taken for granted, of an ‘essence’ of Christianity . . . active improvement, the confidence of faith and the welfare that derives from this. . . . Salvation means moral possession.⁴

To the view that Christian faith can be reduced to moral improvement Ash Wednesday comes along as something of a scandal. For on this day the reading of the Sermon on the Mount speaks of the *secret* prayer of the faithful, the direct opposite of public demonstration of one’s improvement. The secret prayer itself does not dwell on the improvement of the one who prays it. It is presented by Jesus as the *best* prayer that petitions God to come and save. It is indeed Jesus’ own prayer. Irv Arnquist and Louis Flessner wonder,

What has happened to this secret prayer? How did it get so far out of the closet? Who knows how many times it has been printed on bookmarks and pencils, needlepointed into wall hangings, inscribed, carved, and cross-

¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Trans. by Talcott Parsons (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2003), pp. 116-139. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Belnap of Harvard, 2007), pp. 311-312;479-499 See also Hans J. Iwand, *The Righteousness of Faith According to Luther*. Trans. by Randi H. Lundell (Eugene, Oregon: WIPF and Stock, 2008), pp. 39-42

² “We can see its [Eighteenth Century Christianity] sterling, but somewhat limited horizon, its modest but self-centered confidence, its sage compliance with superiors and its condescension towards inferiors, its inclination towards the practical and the tangible and its justified desire for outward peace and inward tranquility, its need to be elevated above the cares of everyday life and its sober disinclination for incomprehensible paradoxes.” Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947, 2002), p. 77.

³ “Repent for the kingdom of God has come near.”

⁴ Barth. pp. 154, 155.

stitched? And how often has it not been a convenient way to close a church meeting or to cue the ushers to send the people forward for Holy Communion? What has become of this secret prayer?⁵

The reading for Ash Wednesday depicts Jesus centering on a secret and brief piety. The best way to pray, insists Jesus, is in private, simply, and briefly.

Piety is both useful and dangerous. Piety – and I intend the word without prejudice – is the visible, active way that our faith is lived out. It consists of practices and habits that others can see. You and I will always have some piety or other. The question is really about what sort of piety the will Christian adopt. It can either free or enslave. It can be a blessing or a curse. In this Sermon on the Mount Jesus recommends a piety that is in secret and simple.

Jesus does not command a secret piety because he has a thing against trumpets. Nor does he teach brevity in prayer to indicate that the one who works hard enough to simplify the prayer is the one who is heard by God. Jesus commands brevity in prayer to keep the disciples from being distracted by anything they might do themselves. He offers them a prayer that does not even once ask God to make them holy, and he sends the disciples behind closed doors to pray because he doesn't want them to be worrying about what other people think. Not one petition asks God to make them look good.⁶

As Luther well understood, the Lord's Prayer is distinctive in that it is directed so intently on *God* and not on you or me. "[S]in is identical with a life that is in the iron grip of the self and is, we might say, a life that has been ravaged and cunningly imprisoned by the self."⁷ The point of Ash Wednesday is to shake our confidence in faith's progress in ourselves. It is not to ask that God make us better, or more obedient, or to make our progress in the faith more visible. The purpose of Ash Wednesday is to direct our attention to God. It has become painfully obvious that our problem is not keeping away from sin like so many unintended mistakes, but that we creatures habitually turn to ourselves instead of God. And those selves are as bankrupt now as when we first began. "Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return." Ash Wednesday brings us to the end of ourselves.

An audacious prayer, the Lord's Prayer is. It dares to remind God to be God. It asks God to bring what God has promised. It petitions God to be God and right now, please. The object of this piety is God, not self. The preoccupation of this prayer is the imminent reign of God.

⁵ Irving J. Arnquist and Louis R. Flessner, "Preaching on the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:1-8)," *Word and World*, 10/1 (1990), 81.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁷ Iwand, p. 55.

This is the prayer of the one who anxiously waits for the dawn to come. It is the prayer after the accident when all is strewn about. The Lord's Prayer is the prayer of the victims of the accident who have their eyes all "fixed upon the coming ambulance."⁸

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.*

This is Jesus' own prayer, his own piety. And "he invites us also to pray it, and so enter into his piety and live in his righteousness."⁹

We enter a season that does not promise to make you a better person. We enter a season that will not dwell on our progress or our improvement. We enter a season praying for rescue.

When these ashes are placed on your mortal forehead, there begins a season where in closeted silence and brevity of prayer we come to loosen our grip on ourselves and how we come across to people, and look only to God. Indeed, this is the season of the end of ourselves. This is a time to fix our gaze on a dominion coming from outside of us. And pray that God be the God he has promised to be and save us. And save us. Amen.

⁸ Arnquist and Flessner, 83.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.