

Episcopal Church - Sermon by J. Barrett Lee
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Sermon Ash Wednesday B 2024

“How are you?”

“I’m good.”

Isn’t that a funny question? It’s probably the most frequently asked and most dishonestly answered question we face in a typical day. Most people don’t want to hear the honest truth. Can you imagine what would happen, if they did?

You would pass a total stranger on the street and ask, “How are you?”

And they would say, “Well, I just came from my doctor and he said the rash on my backside is nothing to worry about...”

You would immediately be like, “WOAH! TMI! I did not need to know all that!”

There is only one acceptable answer to the question, “How are you?”

That answer is, “I’m good.”

People don’t ask that question because they want to know the truth. They ask it because human beings are social animals and we’re just checking in with the herd. We’re like a pack of gazelles, grouped together on the savanna, watching out for predators. When I see them on the TV nature shows, I imagine them talking to each other like people do, and they’re saying the exact same things: “How are you? I’m good. You good? I’m good. You good? I’m good...”

We do it because we’re social animals, and that’s a very good thing. The herd instinct evolved because every member of the group stands a better chance of survival if we are all looking out for each other. When someone asks, “How are you,” what they’re really asking is, “How are WE?” And furthermore, because every individual is part of the herd, what they’re really REALLY asking is, “How am I?”

I wonder what it would be like to switch the pronouns in our casual conversations? We’d walk by a total stranger in the street and ask, “How am I?” And they would respond, “You’re good.” It would be much more honest to do it that way, but that’s just not how our social discourse has evolved.

The truth is, even if we did switch it around like that, it still wouldn’t solve the underlying problem of looking for self-validation from other people. The upside of being a social animal, especially for gazelles, is that there is safety in numbers; the downside, especially for humans, is that we have a tendency to identify too strongly with the herd. We rely too much on other people to tell us who we are. So, we begin to think that how we appear, in the eyes of other people, is who we really are, in an ultimate sense.

And that is the question that we are really, REALLY, really asking when we meet each other on the street. The question on our lips is, “How are you,” but we’re really asking, “how are WE,”

and we are really REALLY asking, “How am I,” and we are really, REALLY, really asking, “Who am I?” That’s the question that keeps us up at night.

Jesus of Nazareth understood this fact about human nature. That’s why he taught us, in today’s gospel, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them” (Matthew 6:1). He knew full well that the human herd instinct, while helpful for survival, could not fully satisfy our inner longing to know ourselves. At best, it can help us maintain a sense of order and group solidarity; at worst, it can reduce morality and identity to the lowest common denominator of “keeping up appearances.” Jesus understood that what matters most is not how we appear on the outside but who we are on the inside, and that is something that the general herd of humanity cannot tell us.

This is why Jesus, in today’s gospel, gives such strong warnings against the hypocrisy that comes with praying, fasting, and giving alms in public. Each of these things is good, in itself, but if we only do it to gain the approval of other people, we miss the point of why we do it.

So Jesus says that, when we donate to a worthy cause, we should “not let [our] left hand know what [our] right hand is doing” (3). And when we pray, we should “go into [our] room and shut the door” (6). And when we fast, we should “put oil on [our] head and wash [our] face[s]” (17).

Jesus teaches us, “pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (6). He tells us to keep these things private, not because they are shameful, but because their performance for the sake of public approval causes us to miss their point. The purpose of these spiritual exercises is to help us look inward, rather than outward, for the answer to our most burning question: “Who am I?”

The forty days of Lent are the perfect time for us to take that honest look inside and find out who we are when no one else is looking. Traditionally, the Church has taught that Lent is a season of penitence, where we express sorrow for our sins. That is certainly part of it. Any honest look inside ourselves involves looking at those parts of our personality that we don’t like. But there’s more to it as well: An honest look inside of ourselves, away from the opinions of other people, leads us to embrace and celebrate parts of ourselves that we have kept hidden away out of fear that these aspects of who we are might not be acceptable to the people around us.

The season of Lent is a time when you can rediscover these parts of yourself and realize that this is how God made you, this is how God loves you, and this is how you reflect the image of God in a way that it is utterly unique to yourself. THIS is who you are. Embrace it, celebrate it, forgive it if you must, and love yourself the way God loves you, just the way you are.

Friends, I want to leave you tonight with a question. This is not a question I want you to answer out loud or right now. I want you to think about it. I want you to carry it with you through these forty days of Lent. I want you to ask yourself this question very seriously and deeply, and I want you to trust that whatever answer you come up with will be the right answer for you.

Are you ready for the question?

Here it is: “How are you?”