

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>3</sup>But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup>so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.(Matthew 6:3-4, NRS)

The traditional disciplines of Lent are fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. These three are meant to depict and guide the heart of one wholly surrendered to God. Fasting represents the consecration of our bodies to Christ, including the use of our strength and time for good deeds. Prayer represents the turning of our spirits toward the Holy Trinity. And almsgiving represents the offering of our money to the Lord and to the poor and needy, whom the Lord especially loves and worries for. And so, with our whole being — with our bodies, our spirits, and our finances — we try to draw closer to God and to walk nearer to Jesus.

So, these three — fasting, prayer, and almsgiving — we are to do these things. The penitential season of Lent asks us to renew our commitment to them and our whole-hearted surrender to the Lord.

Furthermore, not only are we to do these good deeds, but we are to do them with an innocent and pure heart, not as a strategy for winning the praise of others, but simply because we are trying to be people of love in this world.

Let me give you an example of such purity from the life of our Lord Jesus. It concerns a man with a withered hand.

Once upon a time there was man with a withered hand. Jesus healed this man, not to win the praise of others, but simply because Jesus is a kind-hearted man. He is the sort of man you and I are supposed to become. The story can be found in St. Matthew, Chapter 12. It goes this way:

<sup>10</sup>And behold, there was a man with a withered hand. And they asked him, “Is

it lawful to heal on the sabbath?” so that they might / accuse him. <sup>11</sup>He said to them, “What man of you, if he has one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? <sup>12</sup>Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath.” <sup>13</sup>Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, whole like the other. <sup>14</sup>But the Pharisees went out and took counsel against him, how to / destroy him.(Matthew 12:10-14, RSV)

I have particular sympathy for this man with the withered hand, because my grandmother, Lydie Bilbrough, had such a hand. It didn't hold her back much. She was a feisty little one, who did *her share* of work, fair and square. But her hand just lay there, limp. It was as if her wrist had been broken, such that she had absolutely no ability to lift her hand. She would wrap her arm around the wash and carry it out to the wash tub, but her hand could not help her. She could carry the wood from the porch to the kitchen, pry open the plates in the top of the wood burning stove and put the pieces of wood in one by one, but she had to use her other hand to do these things. She had to use her other hand to open a jar of jam. She had to use her other hand to button her coat. She had to use her other hand to do a hundred things in the day, because her one hand was withered. It pleases me very much to think that as Jesus healed the man in the gospel

story, so he will heal the hand of my dear old grandmother, Lydie, up there in heaven.

But, you know, Jesus can heal the hand of Lydie up there in heaven, and not get in much trouble for it. Not so here on earth.

The occasion for compassion was this crippled man in the synagogue. The man had a withered hand. It slowed him down. It caused people in the village to pity him. It must have kept him from earning much of a living for his family. It drew the eye of passersby. The man was suffering because of this withered hand, and so Jesus gave that most wonderful of alms to the man: he gave him the chance for a new and better life.

Notice that Jesus did not do this deed of kindness in order to gain the praise of others. Jesus himself is the walking, talking example of what it means to give your alms in such a way that your left hand does not know what your right hand is doing. That is, Jesus did his good deeds with a pure and innocent heart.

There was no advantage for Jesus in healing the man with the withered hand. Indeed, there was only disadvantage. You heard the ominous ending to the story:

<sup>14</sup>But the Pharisees went out and took counsel against him, how to / destroy him.(Matthew 12:14, RSV)

In the end, they and others did. They destroyed Jesus. Furthermore, Jesus knew that it would happen. He knew that his path in this world was heading to Calvary. But, as St. Peter so simply and beautifully summarizes the life of his Master:

...he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.(Acts 10:38, RSV)

This is what Ash Wednesday and Lent are about. They are about loving the Lord and loving our neighbors with a pure, innocent love — a love that is willing even to brave the Cross as we walk in the footsteps of our Master and our Saviour, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.