

**Ash Wednesday – Year C – February 17, 2010**  
**Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 103:8-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**  
**Susan E. Wilmot**

What do the words imitation, replica or fake bring to mind? Perhaps it's fake Rolexes, imitation Cartier jewelry, or replicas of other famous brand names. However we wish to wrap it up, the business of counterfeit goods amounts to billions of dollars each year. For brand name corporations, this represents a huge loss of income. Shoes, clothes, videos, DVDs, computer games and software -- you name it -- there is almost certainly a cheaper, often illegal copy for sale alongside the real thing. For the average consumer, it can be a huge temptation to satisfy our wants and desires immediately, at a price we can afford, with minimal risk of legal consequences.

Today's Gospel lesson might also sound legalistic to our ears. The tone is very much like a prescriptive list for righteousness that in and of itself may quickly become self-righteous piety. Each of the spiritual disciplines listed by Matthew as teachings of Jesus, are good things. Within the context of the Jewish-Christian community that Matthew is writing to, the practices of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting were quite common, and are still to be encouraged amongst Christians. So why would Jesus be found telling us to beware of practicing our piety before others? And why would we be offered this reading on Ash Wednesday of all days? Today, of course, is marked, if you'll pardon the pun, by a very public display of our faith, through the imposition of ashes on our foreheads. Some of us choose to wipe our faces after the service, and some of us choose to bear our ashes all day. There are good reasons for both choices, and in the context of Matthew's message, we should all consider why we do what we do in this respect.

In 2009 customs and border patrol agents seized the equivalent of two hundred and sixty million dollars worth of counterfeit goods coming into the United States alone. That doesn't account for all the items that made it through undetected. The bottom line here: there is a lot of fake out there. In the Gospel lesson, Jesus names the ostentatious displays of religion in order to be seen by others as hypocrisy. The word comes from the world of theater. In the Greco-Roman world of Jesus' day, the actors who played a role whilst wearing a mask were called hypocrites, for hiding their true identity behind a mask. Today you and I also define hypocrites as those who play a role that does not reflect their real self. Modern hypocrites are not confined to the stage, however, and they hide their masks well. Yet, fake is still fake, even if we lack the discernment to always see it.

On Sunday, we explored what *genuine* faithfulness looks like in the lives of believers including believing, trusting, and doing God's will. The relational element of our faith is established when we trust Jesus as our Lord and Savior; grow in relationships within a community of faith; and offer ourselves in service to God through acts of kindness and justice to all. We embody faithfulness when we put our faith into action for the glory of God, as expressed in our ministries and calling. In other words, in the offering of our spiritual gifts to build up the Body of Christ, and to serve our neighbors. There is no doubt that the three disciplines of charitable giving, prayer, and fasting can also be authentic signs of faith and justice. For example, giving generously to help the poor is a faithful response to systemic injustice. Injustice is, perhaps, most noticeable in our world by the vast chasm dividing the wealthy and the poor. In terms of prayer, our own *Links of Prayer* team prays daily for this whole community of faith, as well as offering prayers for others, including the afflicted. We intercede in faith, for God's justice and mercy. As for fasting, this has long been a Christian discipline, and is often exercised to stand in solidarity with the hungry of the world, as an act of justice. French writer, Joseph Joubert, has a wonderful definition of justice. "Justice is truth in action." Even now, it is not too early in our Lenten journey to hold some questions in our hearts. Before we reach the culmination of our celebration in the Paschal mystery of Jesus' glorious resurrection, which is the hope of our eternal life, we will hear Pontius Pilate demand of Jesus, "What is truth?" And when we consider that, perhaps we will also discern what truth in action really looks like.

Less than a week ago, the news agency Reuters reported the seizure of a huge haul, actually half a

million tons, of fake goods discovered in an Italian warehouse. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between what's real and what's not; what's genuine, and what is phony. Not always, but quite often, we have the biggest clue, simply based on the price, or the quality of the goods being offered. Jesus wanted us all to beware of the consequences of inauthentic devotions. As Matthew takes great pains to remind each of us, good deeds can quickly be twisted into shams when the motivation for action is rooted in self, and the desired result is a glittering self-image and honor from others. As a consequence, what should be offered to God as a temple of the Holy Spirit – in other words, our whole self -- becomes little more than a warehouse full of fake merchandise. For the treasure trove of instant gratification, in order to be noticed and get the kudos, credit and admiration our ego believes we deserve, there is an eternal and hidden cost. The spiritual price we pay for our lack of integrity and authenticity is ultimately very high indeed.

Jesus' hyperbolic admonition to give secretly, pray secretly, and fast secretly is not prescriptive in either practice or the specifics of the three disciplines described. It is merely descriptive of some authentic acts of justice that when exercised with faithfulness, reflect God's truth. Faithfulness drives deeds that are motivated by God's love, and given out of a heartfelt desire to glorify God, rather than self. Authentic faith is always marked by acts of love that are less concerned with our own reputation or résumé than with humbly offering ourselves to God. Herein lies the good news of today's gospel message and the season of Lent. It is our opportunity to get real in preparation for the reality of God's kingdom now and beyond all time. Lent is a gift of God's grace to get real with ourselves by taking an honest inventory of who we are, and where we are in our journey of faithfulness. Lent is also a time to get real with others: to turn our selfishness around into greater selflessness. A chance to confess our sins, and truly repent by making amends where we can, and making positive changes that align our will with God's will. Today begins a season of discovery, illumined by God's love in Christ and empowered by the indwelling Holy Spirit. It is a time to give and seek genuine forgiveness, clearing out all shoddy replicas and faux images. A time to remember that the gift of Christ's forgiveness is transforming each of us from self-centeredness into God-centered students and followers of our Lord and savior.

Another way of looking at the real thing is examining our integrity. It begs the question of whether we are the same person in private as we are in public. Can we say in all honesty, what you see is what you get? Living with integrity is deeply resonant with knowing who we are, including our faults and failings, and submitting ourselves to God's will. We can all work on our integrity. There are many ways to cast aside our masks, and ask God to heal our wounds, and bring us to wholeness, and fullness in Christ Jesus. In the language of the Lutheran tradition, Lent is a time to get real about putting "old things" to death, and to raising up "new beings" of life and faith. That's an elegant summary of who we are as Christians. It reflects the gift of God's grace at our baptism, where we die to sin, and are raised up to new life in Christ. It also mirrors the most foundational aspect of our faith in our hope for eternal life, and a resurrection life now. This is what we are marking our steps and progress towards, as we prepare for Easter throughout our Lenten experience.

Embodying our faith frequently means taking a counter-cultural route. Cultural pressure tends to push all of us towards behaviors that reflect the pervasive attitude that "perception is reality" regardless of the truth. And that success is measured by human standards, rather than faithfulness to God. The temptation to bolster our image or make a good impression on others is very real. Giving in to that temptation is taking a short-term view. That kind limited vision means we miss the fine print about the hidden charges, most of which accrue against our integrity. Through faithful acts of justice, grounded and motivated by God's love, we strengthen our capacity to please God, and live authentic lives of faith. In the balance, we can settle for a costly imitation of life, or we can accept the real thing through God's gift of grace, and freedom in Christ. May God bless us all with a holy Lent.

Amen.