

**Ash Wednesday, 2015 - MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21**  
**Rev. Ellen Schoepf**

- He is older than the hills.
- I'm so hungry I could eat a horse.
- What she said was so funny I almost died laughing!
- She cried for days on end.

Hyperbole – we all use it. Hyperbole is a figure of speech in which the expression used is an **exaggeration** of the meaning; an expression by which things are represented as much greater or less, better or worse, than they really are. Hyperbole is often a tool of sarcasm and is used to evoke a strong, emotional response. It augments reality and carries the listener or the reader beyond the boundaries of cogent thought.

We all use hyperbole, and guess what? So does the Bible and so does Jesus!! In today's gospel reading Jesus talks about almsgiving, prayer and fasting – and he uses hyperbole with maybe even a touch of sarcasm. On this day when we come to church and solemnly begin a 40 day journey to the cross, we find Jesus reaching the climax of his Sermon on the Mount and using hyperbole to teach us about discipleship. While he is talking about three very solemn religious disciplines, he does so by using exaggeration in his examples.

For those of us who come to receive ashes and mark the beginning of Lent, we might focus on giving more to others during this season. We

might adopt one or more of the ancient Lenten practices. We may even incorporate the Lenten discipline of giving up something important to us for this brief period of time. However, if you came to hear Jesus speak solemn words to you about being religious for the next 40 days, you will be disappointed because today Jesus comes barging into our serious gathering, spinning wild exaggerations. He comes barging into this contemplative event and starts cracking jokes about our use of spiritual disciplines. And, I have to say, “Jesus, you are again making me feel very unsettled.”

Listen again to the hyperbole as he talks about almsgiving. In essence he says, “Here come the almsgivers, and they are accompanied by the brass section of the symphony. Watch them. They give a few dollars to this cause, and the trumpets play a fanfare; they give a few dollars more to another cause, and the trombones blare out a salute! And, everyone watching says, ‘My, they are generous.’ But I say, ‘Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward.’”

And then, he seems to exaggerate even more when he talks about prayer. He says, “Over there stand some people praying. You know they are praying because everyone in the room knows the prayer they are saying. And, these praying people know others who are blocks away may

**hear** their praying. So their words go on and on and on and on. They are always stretching for one more crumb of emotion and another shred of humility. People listening to them might say, 'My, my, they certainly pray well.' But I truly tell you, they have received their reward.'" (Barbara Brown Taylor in *Feasting on the Word*)

Now do you begin to see the hyperbole and sarcasm in Jesus' words? Who has trombones sound a fanfare before they give gifts and who prays so people blocks away can hear them praying? Do you begin to see the absurdity of his words? And, he is not finished. No. Now he addresses our Lenten discipline of fasting. He says, "Here come people fasting. You **know** they are fasting by their gaunt faces and eyes crazed from lack of sugar. They have mussed their hair and torn their garments because you have to **do** something to show people you are fasting. Oh, they certainly are religious. Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward."

Yes, Jesus has me unsettled and I don't like it. I have to say, "Jesus, today we came to gather here and again be marked with the sign of the cross. We came to be **reminded** that we are dust and to dust we will return! This is not funny stuff. Today we remember **your** journey to the

cross. How can you make such light of something that is so important, something that lies at the heart of our faith?”

Now, I do not want to take away from the solemn nature of Ash Wednesday. I think solemnity and time for self-examination are critical, necessary and important, especially within a culture that increasingly shies away from such experience. However, lest we take our Ash Wednesday religiosity too seriously, I suggest Jesus’ words to us are **not** simply exaggeration. No. He parodies our actions and behavior so that we take a good look at **ourselves**. Because, you see, it is our **selves** that are the problem. These tragic, needy, fragile, narcissistic selves that we **are** can hardly **imagine** that we are really dust. We think we will live forever. And, just think about it. We take ourselves **so** seriously. We think our **work** is so very important. Our **families** are so very important. Our **church going** is so very important. **Every** aspect of our lives, **every** little thing we do, is so **very** important. Everything others **say** about **us** is so very important, at least in **our** minds. Yes, our little worlds really do revolve around our **selves**. In many ways, our little worlds revolve around our **fears**, **especially** our fear of death. And, the little worlds we create feed our egos but starve our inner selves.

Today Lent begins and the cross lies before us. As we follow Jesus to the cross, just maybe his words tell the truth about the **folly** of **our** actions, tell the truth about our need for God's **presence** to **fill** our inner starving self. Jesus' words remind us this Lenten journey is **not** about us and what **we** do. It is **all** about what **God** does. It is all about God's gift to people who are starving for **meaning**. It is all about God's gift to people who are starving for **comfort and love**. It is all about God's gift to people who are starving for **life**. Jesus' words call us to **lose ourselves** so we can find **God's own self**. Because, in that cross that lies before us, we are going to find something that **truly** feeds our starving selves. We will find God's **greatest** act of love for the sake of the whole world. And **that** is **no** exaggeration!