

“Element of Lent: Sand”

Rev. Michelle Madsen-Bibeau

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First Sunday in Lent

First Congregational Church of Haddam

Higganum Congregational Church

Matthew 6:1-21 1

“Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

2 So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

3But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

5And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 6But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

7And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. 8Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

9 “This, then, is how you should pray: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, 10your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. 11Give us today our daily bread. 12And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

14For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

16“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 17But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

19“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths

and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

How many times do you look in a mirror each day?

Many of us probably see ourselves in a bathroom mirror a couple times a day when we brush our teeth.

We may check what our clothes look like in a mirror in our bedroom after we get dressed, make sure our pants aren't stuck in our socks and our shirts are tucked in.

We have a mirror in the entryway of our house, so sometimes I see myself in that mirror when I leave- kind of a last chance to notice if I remembered to comb my hair. I notice people also will use it when they come in, particularly if they are worried their hat or the wind messed up their 'do.'

My current car has a visor mirror for both the Driver and the Passengers, plus the rear view mirrors. Sometimes when I'm walking along a city street I'll see myself reflected back from a shop window.

Lately I've started facetimeing more, and I've noticed both I and the people I'm talking to, who shall remain nameless, but who are my kids, will use the picture in a picture from the video to take long looks at ourselves, play around making faces, etc. That's a kind of electronic mirror.

A few years ago a study was reported that the average young person will take over 25,000 selfies in their lifetime. Young women aged 16 to 25 may spend as much as five hours per week taking selfies, and an average of 93 million selfies are taken daily worldwide.

That is a lot of looking at ourselves.

And yet we know that what we can see when we look in a mirror, or through a camera lens, isn't the whole story of who we are. In fact it's probably the very least important part of who we are. People may make a big deal about it if you're good looking, and they may be awful about it if you're not, but there are famous and not-so-famous great people whose outsides aren't great, and there are spectacularly gorgeous individuals none of us would want to share an Uber, much less a meal, or a life with.

So we need better mirrors. We need something that shows us more about ourselves than what people see on the outside. And at this time of year, the season of Lent, lots of Christians recommit to trying to look at ourselves beyond what this kind of mirror shows.

We do it in many different ways. We pray. We read the Bible. We take a break, or a 'fast,' from things that have become compulsions or distractions. We take on good deeds like contributing to worthy causes or volunteering our time. And these things help us shift our perspective, get us away from thinking our value comes from what we look like on the outside.

Of course we are still human. It's easy to find ourselves bragging even about trying to live more like God wants. That's why at the beginning of Lent we always read the verses we heard a moment ago where Jesus warns us: don't pray or give or fast to show off! Have these things between you and God, so that God and not you is glorified.

Last week and this morning we had the chance to make masks that represent how others see us and how we are on the inside. Masks sometimes are used to hide who we are, like at a costume party where nobody knows who's who, or when bank robbers cover their faces hoping they won't get caught.

But these masks we made, and which we laid on the altar, and which we will take home with us when we leave, are supposed to help us see who we are, not hide it. We are invited to think: if people see us differently from who we really are- if the outside is different from the inside of these masks- why?

For some of us, the way other people see us may be a distorted reflection of how they see the whole world. That can make us angry, or sad. And while we cannot always change those distortions of how other people see, we can work to make the world more fair and safe. If we help make the world a better reflection of God's love, there should be fewer people who put others down to try to feel better about themselves.

Our masks also might show us if we have been hesitating to let people know the real us. Maybe during this Lent we will believe God created us worthy of love. Maybe we will allow God to smooth some of our rough edges, or even turn us around if we have been heading down the wrong path. Maybe we will become more willing to let our true beauty be seen by others.

This morning's "Lenten element" is Sand.

Sand may remind us of desert Wilderness, and it also is a main source of the silica from which glass is made, and thus mirrors and camera lenses and phone screens. You have a bag of sand to use in your home resurrection garden, but you will encounter literally thousands of examples of Sand during the coming week. May some of them remind us of our commitments to fast and pray and live with compassion in the name of God who shaped us from the dust of the earth.

I want to close with a quote from Henry Nouwen, titled "You Belong to God":

You are not what you do, although you do a lot. You are not what you have collected in terms of friendships and connections, although you might have many. You are not the popularity that you have received. You are not the success of your work. You are not what people say about you, whether they speak well or whether they speak poorly about you. All these things that keep you quite busy, quite occupied, and often quite preoccupied are not telling the truth about who you are. I am here to remind you in the name of God that you are the Beloved Daughters and Sons of God, and that God says to you, "I have called you from all eternity and you are engraved from all eternity in the palms of my hands. You are mine. You belong to me, and I love you with an everlasting love." Amen.