

Sermon
Ash Wednesday 2024

Like it or not, we live in a world of social media. Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, Mastodon, and I don't know what all else, is happily taking in the lives we give them. Photos of our kids and grandkids, pictures and snippets of us and our spouse, along with images of everything from our vacations to restaurant meals, all grace one or more of these social media accounts. Some of these posts are fun, some are intentionally deceptive, and some are designed for self-promotion.

Some posts are because you want to share the beauty and experience of a place you know most people won't get to. I have a friend who was recently in India and she posted some amazing photos during her trip. Several years ago, Joelene and I took a group of high schoolers from Maryland over to the Oregon coast, and we posted pictures for people to see what they were doing in that beautiful part of the world. Others are constantly posting photos or videos of themselves and their partner or spouse. For some people, social media posts are all about the clicks or the likes or how many comments they can generate. Regardless of the reason, we ultimately post pictures because we want people to see them; otherwise, why bother to post pictures?

Now there's nothing wrong with doing this. Joelene and I have done it, and there are several people here who have also done it. But, when it comes to posting pictures of you and your partner or spouse, I ran across something a while ago that basically said, "Couples who post lots of pictures on social media tend to be less happy than couples who don't."

This, of course, is a generalization and doesn't account for all couples, but the point it was making was that social media couples are busy spending their time trying to look happy, while couples who post fewer pictures of themselves tend to be happier because they are busy spending their time actually working on their relationship and living their lives. In other words, they are too busy living their lives to continually post pictures.

What does posting pictures of you and your partner/spouse, or not posting, have to do with Lent? Maybe nothing. Maybe everything.

In Lent we are called to a season of self-examination and repentance, prayer, fasting, and self-denial. Lent is a highly introspective and highly personal season. It's a season where we look to place God where God belongs in our lives – first. It's a time we replace overeating with fasting to remind us of those who don't have enough. It's a time we cut back on our consumption and give what we would have spent on ourselves to those in need. It's a time we replace gathering up with giving away. It's a time we replace social media or computer games with reading and meditating on God's holy word. It's a time we recognize how and where we've sinned against God and others and work towards repentance and forgiveness. It's a time we replace self-centered desires with God-centered activities.

Lent is a time we focus on our relationship with God. It is a time to return to the Lord, rending our hearts and not our clothing, as Joel reminds us. It's a time we follow Jesus' admonition to focus on doing things in secret so that only God sees what we are doing. Lent isn't about showing off our piety to others; it's about deepening our relationship with God, and that is generally something that is done behind the scenes.

Which brings me back to those social media couples who continuously post their happy photos. If the report I mentioned is correct, that couples who post lots of pictures are less happy than those who don't, then I think there's a corollary between that and Ash Wednesday/Lent.

Joel says to return to the Lord, and to rend our hearts not our clothing. In Joel's time, you could publicly show off your piety by tearing your clothing. It advertised to others that you were doing something for God. It was also a form of self-promotion that said, "Look at how pious I am."

Joel tells us to rend our hearts, not our clothing, because what we do is not only between us and God, but tearing our clothing doesn't actually lead us to change our lives. Jesus tells us to practice our piety before God in secret, not before others publicly, for the same reason.

The look-at-me culture of social media is not a new phenomenon, it goes back to the time of Joel and Jesus. Trying to convince other people, the public in general, or your social media followers, that you're happy doesn't lead to happiness. What leads to happiness is to work on the relationship with your partner or spouse. . . or God . . . behind the scenes. Spending quality time on your relationship through conversation, mutually satisfying activities, and prayer leads to a strong, healthy relationship and, ultimately, happiness.

This Lent, don't proclaim to the world what pious acts you're performing. Instead, work on them in secret, changing your heart over time, and drawing ever closer to God.

And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Amen.