

Ash Wednesday
Isaiah 58:1-12
Psalm 51
Matthew 6:1-6; 16-21
"Pointing"

Don't talk with your mouth full.

Get your elbows off the table.

When you want something say, "Please."
What's the magic word? Please.

When you get something, say "thank you."

When someone thanks you, say, "you're welcome."

Not, "oh, no bother."

You ever heard that one?
"Well, thank you." no bother.

I don't like that....I don't like that...I want to say, "Really, no bother? NO bother? Aren't I worth at least a little bother.

Like a lot of things, "you're welcome" is going away.....being replaced by no bother...

But there's hope....right down the street here. Right down the street...

Order a number 1...that's what we order....a number 1 meal.

Fried chicken breast, pickles, on a soft bun, waffle fries, iced tea.

Order at the drive through, or go inside, it doesn't matter.

If you say thank you when you receive your change, or your order, or a refill, if you say, "thank you," what are you going to hear back?

What are you going to hear back?

That's right.

Not..."no bother"....not "you're welcome"

but "MY PLEASURE."

I don't know who at Chick Fil A came up with that one....but they're a genius.

In a world like this where it seems sometimes that nobody gives a rip....

If somebody tells me that helping me was their pleasure, I'll order 10 number 1 combos right after another, just to hear it.

Did your momma teach you manners?
And if you had children, did you teach your own?

Things that are right and meet to do; things that you just don't do.

They differ in every culture.

I had a Spanish teacher tell me that this (flicking off shoulder) was the rudest gesture you could make in her culture.

Looks like brushing dandruff or dog hair off to me....but not there.

In Japan, everybody bows slightly to everyone else...."Arigato, gozaimas."

That's polite....after a week there, I got used to it....I came back home....and without thinking, bowed down to everybody....thank you....and they looked at me like I was crazy..."What's the matter with you??"

When I went to Israel, I stayed with a Palestinian family in Bethlehem.

I wanted to be polite.

I asked a Palestinian friend here, "What's polite?"

When someone offers you something, take it and say thank you. And if you sit down, keep your feet on the floor...don't show your host the bottom of your shoes....that's rude.

When it was time for afternoon tea, my hosts offered me coffee....a little cup, on a tray...it looked like Mississippi mud...

A voice went off inside.....it wasn't "take whatever you're offered"

No, the voice said, "If you don't want to get Montezuma's revenge, DON'T DRINK ANYTHING but bottled drinks.

So I said, real polite like, "No thank you."

And my host didn't say...."no bother" ...she was bothered....she looked like I had slapped her in the face.

Oh, I felt bad.....and before I knew it, in my nervousness, I squirmed in my little chair, and crossed my leg, and showed my host the bottom of my big fat shoe.

I think I set international relations back a hundred years.

It's hard to remember, though. Cultures are different

But there are some things that are universally rude.....rude in every culture.

There's one in our Old Testament text tonight....did you catch it?

What is it?

"Don't point."

God says through his prophet, "Take away the pointing of the finger."

Why is pointing your finger so universally regarded as bad form, and why does it show up in the three texts assigned by the church to Ash Wednesday?

What's wrong with pointing your finger?

Well....first of all, pointing at yourself....what is that...what is that....what is it when you point to yourself.....

Well that's arrogant, isn't it?

We are born, we come out of the womb like this, (both fingers pointing at self)

We have a need to be noticed, to be at the center of things.

We're born with it.

Before I had children I subjected my congregation to a sermon about Jesus, lifting up children...saying unless you become like them, you won't make heaven...you remember that text?

And I talked about the attributes of childlikeness Jesus was affirming.

And among them, I raised up unselfishness.

Children are unselfish...I told my flock.

I look back now, they were probably muttering under their breath....Good God, you can tell he hasn't had children.

To a child, all the world's a stage, and they strut as a solo player on it...."Look at me! Look at me!"

We have to learn that we're not the center of the universe....don't we....

And some people never learn.

I had an elder come to me once and say, "We need a handicap ramp for our church."

He was right.

He said, "It's going to cost \$40,000....."

Well, I'm going to give \$25,000 dollars toward that....what do you think?

Oh, that's great! That's great! thank you.

And he said, here's how I want to do that... my family's going to be here a few Sundays from now, and I'd like to get up in front of the congregation that Sunday and present you with a check....what do you say?

What would you have said?

A few weeks later, I swallowed hard, stood up in front of everybody, handed out glory, laud and honor, and got handed a check.

You know what that was? 76 trombones in a big parade, 110 coronets close behind.... That was just a child, never grown up, saying, (pointing to himself) hey look at me! Look at me!

You know anybody like that?

Jesus knows us so well.

So he says, look, when you do good, don't make it a theater production...that's the Greek word Jesus uses *theathanai*....

don't stand on the street corner stage praying, pointing at your piety.

And when you give your alms, don't let your left hand be pointing at yourself while your right hand's held out with your gift..

And when you fast and put ashes on yourself....don't go round out there in the marketplace pointing to your ashes...."Hey everybody, look at me...I've been to the Ash Wednesday servicelook at me, no, Jesus said, wash your face, so no one will know.

"Take away the pointing of the finger," God says...."take away all this pointing at yourself...cause when you come in the front door of the church pointing at yourself, guess who's slipping out the back door?"

And take away the pointing of your fingers at other people.

We're pretty good at that, though, aren't we?

Accomplished finger pointers.

We point the finger of blame at others....you know that....something's wrong, it's not our fault.

That's as old as dirt, as old as the garden where Adam and Eve had messed things up, listening to the serpent, who taught them to point....look here, who's tree is that....Oh, that's God's tree....Really? Hold your hand out, now point your finger at the tree...point your finger back to yourself...now...whose tree is it? Why that's my tree....this is my garden and this is my world...

That didn't work out too good though, did it?
Still not.

Things were a mess. and God came down and said what happened here?

And the man limbered up his new found finger....
Pointed next to him and said....what did he say?

THIS woman, YOU gave me, SHE made me

One chapter before she was ooooh laaah laaah...bone of my bone flesh
of my flesh...she was it....now, its all her fault.

And the woman....what did she do....she limbered up her finger and
pointed at the serpent...THIS serpent....remember...the one you allowed
here....HE did it.

If the serpent had had a finger, he'd have pointed it.

We're good at that...pointing in blame.

I call out sometimes....Sally what'd you do with my tie....

You hear that? My tie's missing, and whose fault is it? Not mine.

I bet you don't ever do that.

We point in blame....and we point in power.

When my firstborn was still a little girl...she said I want to be a preacher
when I grow up...

That's good...honey...why do you want to be a preacher?

Cause when you say stand up everybody stands up....and when you say
sit down everybody sits down.

She thought I was powerful... that's before she understood
Presbyterianism.

Powerful people can point....you, over there...you...over there.

You don't see a man digging a ditch laying down his shovel to point to
his boss. You, over there.

God says, you've got to stop pointing.
Put away your pointing finger, God says...just who do you think you are.

Isaiah says that the pointing people were complaining.

They said, look God, why aren't you noticing us? We've got all kinds of Lenten services, and we've got an Ash Wednesday service...and we're fasting and giving up things for Lent...and you're not noticing.

And God says, here's the fast I want....you stop pointing your powerful finger at the hungry people, take that hand and rattle some pots and pans and give them something to eat other than your blame.

Here's the fast I want....not that you give up chocolate, but that you give up pointing the finger at the homeless, and use that finger to invite them in.

Your finger is powerful....but you've got to put that finger down and put it to work if you want me to notice.

Jesus called them aside and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their superiors exercise authority over them. **26** It shall not be this way among you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must fold up your finger and stop pointing.....be your servant, **27** and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave—...

We point the finger in blame, and in power, we point it in judgment....

Like that elder Jesus told about in Luke 18...stood up in church, pointing praying a prayer....pointing all the while...I thank you that I'm not like her...or like him, or like him....thieves, dishonest, adulterer....especially like HIM...the tax collector. Who does he think he is, in here?

MY first church a couple were coming before the session to join....they were notorious....caught in a very public scandal...infidelity...

They were subsequently married.

Now, a few years later....they'd come to the church...

An elder came in my study before the meeting...

He said, when they're presented, I'm going to have to speak out, and to vote against them...

Why is that? I asked.

He said, "don't you know what they have done?"

Yes, I said. But remember this story....the tax collector.....beating himself in the chest..."through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault."

They're sorry for what they've done, just like he was. Who are we to withhold the grace of Christ from them?

The church is not a rest home for saints....but a hospital for sinners, and no one needs the church more than they do...

Well....I don't know, he said...

They appeared....he kept quiet, though he did kinda point the finger with his eyes.

They passed.

I've thought about that...and decided I was wrong...not wrong about receiving them....but wrong in what I said.

"No one needs the church more than they do?" Oh no, who was I to point and say who needed the church most....I pointed to them. I forgot all about the three fingers pointing back at me.

Judge not (finger pointing) that ye be not judged (three fingers wiggling).

We point the finger in blame and in power, in judgment....and in enmity

Lord knows, there's plenty of that kind of finger pointing going around, isn't there?

There's not much difference between this (finger point) and this (gun).

That's what Jesus said...."You've heard it said that you shall not murder (gun)...but I tell you, when you point your finger and say, "You idiot" you're guilty of murder and in danger of hell fire.

IN truth, there's no difference at all between the pointing of this finger (index) and this one (middle)

And God is saying to us, you've got to put your finger down....put it in its holster....don't even pull it out for your worst enemy.

And God says to us....you've got to stop pointing your finger...at yourself....and at others....to blame them, to Lord it over them, to judge them, to hate them.

It's wrong to point the finger.

Why?

Well, besides the fact that you can't help anybody when you're pointing the finger.....besides that...

Only God has the right to point the finger.

Only God.

On Ash Wednesday, he's pointing at us, just like he pointed at David.

You remember David....greatest king in Israel....forgot who he was.

Saw Bathsheba....pointed at her...

Saw her husband Uriah in the way...pointed to his general, Joab.....Uriah was dead.

David had become an accomplished pointer...

But God is not mocked...

When people in power abuse their power, God is not mocked....he sent Nathan, the storyteller....

Nathan said...would you like a story king...you fancy a story....

Two men living side by side...one in a trailer, the other in a titanic towering mansion.

The poor man had a pet lamb..ate at the table with him and his children, slept in their beds....Rich man had more sheep and lambs than an insomniac could count in a lifetime...

Company came to visit the rich man and he decided to serve lamb...

He waded through his flock reached over the fence, grabbed the poor man's lamb, he slit its throat, butterflied it and served it for dinner.

David, when he heard this, sprung up....and pointed his finger....right at the prophet..."That man shall die."

And Nathan reached out and turned the king's finger, till it pointed back at himself.

You are the man, he said.

And David dropped his finger, and did the only thing you can do when the finger of God points at you.

He cried out, "Have mercy on me....Lord have mercy on me.

Tonight, God points the finger at us.

You are the man....you are the woman...you deserve to die.

And the finger of God will draw the sign of the cross on our foreheads.

The cross that is both the finger of God pointing at us, and the end of all finger pointing.

The place where this (pointing finger) YOU..... gives way to this (hands outstretched)FOR YOU.