

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
"The Ashes and Vocation"
Ash Wednesday

February 14, 2024
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

On Ash Wednesday, it is easy to focus on the ashes. "Ash" is right there in the name of the day. They are smudged in the shape of the cross on our foreheads. You can't ignore those ashes on Ash Wednesday. These ashes, even in their cross shape, are speaking, albeit silently. They tell the fallen world, and everyone else who isn't here tonight, that a new season has started: the springtime season of Lent.

These ashes also preach something else: something even less festive. They are a publicly visible personal testimony of your mortality. You are dying. You will die. This curse of death hangs there all the time – *it's over all creatures* – it's over you, and it marks you. That cross on your forehead just makes it more obvious this evening. Death – *mine and yours* – is around the corner ahead somewhere. So, yes, **"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."** God spoke His words to fallen Adam in Eden, and again to us this evening: **"You are dust"** (Genesis 3:19).

Because you are personally liable – *the Creator of heaven and earth holds you accountable* – for the disobedience that lives in your flesh, the sin that you inherited from your fathers all the way back to Adam, the sin that isn't too hard to find just below the surface of even our most well-performed thoughts, words, and deeds.

Those ashes on your forehead make that point. Ashes remind you of your mortality. Ashes remind you that death is what your secret thoughts, whispered words, and covert deeds really finally get you. Even the ones you thought that were "good."

Not to leave you in despair, those ashes on your forehead also represent one more thing: your only hope. Your sure and certain hope rests in the heavenly Father who **"so loves the world, that He gave His only Son"** (John 3:16), who is compassionate and willing to commute the righteous death sentence He decreed. And who will now judge you not by who you are or from whom you came or even what you've done but will be satisfied in the punishment and death of another – His beloved Son, Jesus, who has taken your sin as well as your "dust," and even your death. So those ashes on your forehead mark you with the sign of the cross – as one redeemed by Christ, the Crucified. God applies all the bloody salvation that Jesus has won to you.

The prophet Joel asks, “*Who knows?*” Perhaps God will relent and turn away His fierce anger so that we will not perish (Joel 2:14). Well, He will. He does. He has! That’s the prayer and the solid hope of the sinner, the Christian, the penitent – that God will be merciful to me, a sinner. So let the ashes “preach” all that and remind you that your Christian life is a life of daily repentance, even when Lent is over. As Christians, we repent daily and receive God’s forgiveness daily.

As Christians, we experience real sorrow for sin, but this sorrow also stands alongside the sure mercies of God. The one true God is gracious and merciful. For merciful is precisely how God is. And to do you all this good, His mercies are tied forever to the suffering and death of Jesus. And He brings to you all this heavenly good in the place you are right now. He gives out exclusively what He has promised: you hear His Word and you are given His body and blood to feed and nourish your soul. He comes through Word and Sacrament.

Even though today is Ash Wednesday, the true emphasis of this day is not about those ashes. And the emphasis of Lent is not actually fasting, or prayer, or almsgiving for the poor, or anything else we might take on as part of your Lenten observance. Now, all those things are certainly good, right, and salutary, but they aren’t the main thing. Look at what Christ says in today’s Gospel lesson. Jesus doesn’t say to the Christian: “*If you pray, if you give to the needy, if you fast.*” No, what does He say? He says, “*When you pray, when you give to the needy, when you fast.*” So, He’s not adding three new commandments. He’s describing you and what you do in your Christian calling, your Christian vocation.

None of these things is done to draw attention to ourselves. No, He says, “*Give to the needy ... in secret. Pray ... in secret. Fast ...in secret.*” Now, there is always a temptation to curve it all back onto ourselves, to “perform” our piety “out loud” or where people can see it, like posting about your Lenten fast on social media. And you may want to admire those ashes on your forehead in the mirror or post your Ash Wednesday picture on social media, but these only show yourself as dust. “*Remember that you are dust.*” And that Jesus comes to form and shape this dust of ours again, to breath into us His life again, His Word and Spirit.

So, by all means fast and pray and provide Christian charity so that you might remember the fasting of Jesus' 40 days in the desert, the praying of Jesus continually, and the undeserved charity of His grace that our Lord has come to pour out on us in His suffering and death. Fast and make intercessions and deny yourselves for the needs of your neighbor, including inviting them here for your neighbor's salvation. Deny yourself from the worldly cravings you have, all those unnecessary things you desire.

But when you fast, when you pray and when you give, don't make a show of it. Don't do it with the idea that you're bettering yourself or fixing yourself.

Rather, when you fast and pray and give, do it so your right hand doesn't ever know what your left hand has done. Don't do it to get your name on a plaque. Don't take up these Lenten disciplines to become a better person, but so that you might better take in the gifts and treasures our Lord won for you by His Passion, His death, and His resurrection. It is always about that, about Him for you. Discipline your flesh, fast for a time. Not to lose weight. Not to "get a feel" for what Jesus experienced (as if we even could), but so that His Baptism and Holy Absolution and Sacrament on the Altar might be even more taken in by you.

So, as Christ says, ***"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven"*** (Matthew 6:19-20a).

So, treasure those eternal things – the sure mercies of our God, His words in your Baptism, and the bread and wine where He gives you His body and blood. This is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion in and through the Holy Spirit. So, treasure up His riches and the inheritance you have from His shed blood. Everything tied to our Lord's death: like your Baptism into that death and receiving His blood cupped from His hands, feet and side come from His death. You have the real treasure – heavenly treasure, which is the forgiveness of sins!

So, you don't need to ***"lay up for yourselves treasures on earth"*** in your home or bank, where moth and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal, since our real treasure is right here, found in the Word and Sacraments, ***"for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"*** (Matthew 6:21). Where Christ is, there is your treasure. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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