

ASH WEDNESDAY
March 6, 2019

Text: Matthew 6:1-6 and 16-21

Theme: Practice Our Piety

Lutherans are not as strict about the three disciplines of Lent as are some of the other faith traditions. We consider them to be optional rather than obligatory but still we encourage people to pay attention to them and to observe them in earnest because it is understood that fasting, increasing our prayer life, and making sacrificial charitable donations all increase the joy of Easter and assist us in living into the fullness of our faith.

We have an added incentive because Jesus modeled all 3 disciplines throughout his earthly ministry. As soon as he came out of the waters of baptism he fasted. Numerous times he left the crowds of people and found a quiet place to pray. And as an extension of his mercy, our Lord taught us to give unto others without thought of personal gain.

I applaud all those who adhere to the disciplines of Lent for the entire forty days because they do help make us obedient to his will. When we pull back on those things that we love and enjoy / then we allow more room for God. When we consciously pare down our schedules then (for example) it gives us time to spend more time for meditation and prayer. And when we sit down and examine how we spend our money then we can make different choices that increase our giving to those in need.

I also know that over the centuries we have watered down these three disciplines to fit our needs. Since we pray and remember the poor all the time we believe we are already engaged in these faith practices. Our time might be better spent adding some meaningful spiritual exercise into our lives rather than take something away. I am not very good about encouraging a physical fast although growing up my family did not eat meat on Fridays. But for Lutherans fasting is seen in a much broader sense. It is not just centered on withholding food from our meals. It is our ability to say *no* to our inclinations to indulge and cater to any of our desires that lead us away from Christ.

I do remember one Good Friday (after the noonday service) rushing to a fast food restaurant to order a hamburger and fries. The person waiting on me just stared at me in my clerical collar and was frozen in place. He was not sticking out his hand for my money. I told him I was a Lutheran pastor and it was okay.

I have come to the conclusion that once we know what Lent is for then I believe we can better define what we are to do in this very intentional season of the church year. In Lent we center on Christ and the path that took him to the cross. We study the passion and listen to all the details that lead to his crucifixion. And in the midst of the darkness that consumes us on Good Friday we are reminded of the love of God that is beyond human understanding. We are reminded that God sacrificed his Son in human form so that his blood (and not our blood) is shed for the salvation of the world.

The thrust of the gospel that we hear every Ash Wednesday reminds us that the disciplines of Lent are just the outward sign of what is actually taking place inside of us. And it is what is taking place inside of us that matters to God. Hypocrites (we are told) flaunt all of their good deeds because they want to be seen and acknowledged by everyone around them. Jesus is telling us that the only one who needs to see our piety is Christ himself. We do not need to show them to anyone else. We are simply to do it. We are to place our true fasting, our true prayer, and our true care for the poor at the feet of the Holy One.

On Ash Wednesday we strip ourselves bare before God as we let God inside of us. On this day we make our true confession of sin and we include it all – our inability to love our neighbors and our refusal to forgive as we have been forgiven. We confess our unfaithfulness to God and negligence to the cries of other humans and our false judgments against them. We confess that we show a lack of concern for all of his creation. And when we have exhausted our list we beg God to restore us to his favor.

We come here vulnerable and weak but then we hear that God sent his Son to find us in the heap of ash. God picks us up so we can stand tall when we receive his forgiveness. And to seal the promise we will leave today bearing the visible sign of his cross on our foreheads.

Our self-righteous behaviors are seen in secret but then we put that cross in full view for everyone to see . . . to let the world know that our depleted souls are now filled with the breath, life and power of the Holy Spirit. We are not to leave this place dwelling on our death but rather to wonder about what we want to do to live in this new life. Our time on earth is limited and our lives are finite. We do not have forever to live into the grace that comes our way through Jesus Christ.

Once a year we come to hear these same words repeated over and over again – *Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.*

It is because we focus on ourselves that we turn these three disciplines into spiritual resolutions that get broken after a brief period of time – like the resolutions we make at the start of a new year.

So how are we to wear our ashes?

What is acceptable to God is the following –
to free those bound by injustice
to let the oppressed go free
to share our bread with the hungry
to bring the homeless into our houses
and to cover the naked with our clothes

I hope by now that list is familiar. It is found in our alternate reading from Isaiah and it is almost word-for-word what Jesus proclaimed as he taught in the synagogues (a lesson we heard just a couple of weeks ago). Ashes and the confession of our sins and our self-chosen fasts will not in and of themselves draw us one step closer to God. It is why the prophet asks this of us:

Why do we fast but we do not see?

Why humble ourselves but we do not notice?

God wants us to free ourselves from our sin and guilt so that we are free to actually see the other people God puts in our lives. God wants us to recognize them as children of God. God wants us to be generous to them with our compassion. God wants us to invite to our table those whom we would never choose to eat with so we can see what God wants us to see . . . what we are missing because we are too focused on ourselves.

There is no other day in the church year where we see so profoundly the grace of God overshadowing our sins. God is willing to focus not on our past mistakes but on our desire for a new heart. God washes us clean, cleanses every part of our souls, and wipes away anything that stinks of sin, purges us and blots out all that separates us from his love.

How will we wear our ashes? When we leave this place that visible cross will tell the world that we took responsibility for the havoc our sin inflicts on ourselves and on God and on others. It will also tell the world that we will be seeing things differently from now on. It is not the same old, same old. Our time is limited. Our lives are finite. We start now to live in the fullness of his grace. Amen