

We don't really hear anything new in Lent. The story is always the same. At the Lenten midweek services we've begun, once again, to hear the Passion Harmony, the putting together of all four Evangelists' accounts of the Lord's betrayal, suffering, and death. In addition to having us recall the Lord's passion and death each year, Lent is the season above all others that serves as a spiritual check-up. As we pause and consider the central acts of our salvation, the church also bids us to examine our own lives. Ash Wednesday had us come face to face with that inescapable reminder of our mortality, the words were said again and again, as each person came forward. And in case you missed it, they were repeated in last Sunday's Old Testament reading: "**you are dust and to dust you shall return**" (Gen 3:19).

Lent is also accompanied by the traditional disciplines of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. In one way or another we intentionally deprive ourselves of things to remind us that this world is not all there is, that our belly is not our boss, that joy in life does not come from a lot of "likes" on your Facebook post, that the sustaining of life itself does not come from earthly bread. We are also called to devote ourselves to the Word of God and prayer. As the Lord resists the Devil's temptations with Scripture, we see the importance of reading, marking, learning, and inwardly digesting the Word of God. We see that prayer is as essential for the Christian as breathing. And finally, we remember the poor. The holy church, Christians, have always been marked by acts of mercy. Love for the downtrodden, helpless, and those who are otherwise forgotten. This is why we support local and national acts of mercy, such as Project Hope, and Lutherans for Life. It is why in our own personal lives we seek to care for others in need.

Lent is a focused time, it provides us a formal way, of heeding St. Paul's words in today's epistle: "**Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification...**"

Again, on Ash Wednesday we heard our Lord tell His disciples not to decide *whether* they will give to the needy, *whether* they will pray, *whether* they will fast. No, He gives them instructions for *how* they are to do these things. The disciples are followers of Jesus. They believe in Him. They trust in Him. Their life cannot go on unchanged. How can it? So it is for every Christian. For every one who has been called into God's family by faith, joined to Jesus' death and resurrection in the waters of Holy Baptism, there is a real life of faith, of following, of growing in holiness of life. Even as Jesus denied Himself, lived from His Father's Word and in ceaseless prayer to His heavenly Father, and self-giving love that did good to His neighbor, we do the same. For He lives in us.

In the church we distinguish between "justification" and "sanctification." They are important words for the Christian to know. Justification and Sanctification. In justification, God declares us righteous for the sake of His Son, who shed His blood for us. In justification, the Father counts Christ's perfect righteousness to us. This is what gives us life with God. This is what faith receives and believes. This is how and why we are saved. Sanctification immediately accompanies and follows justification. It is where the Holy Spirit works in us and with us, giving us new desires to strive to overcome sin and do good works. Notice, justification is *not* where God does His part and I do mine. It is all God's work. But notice also however that it is wrong to say that since justification is all God's work, then sanctification is all my work. No, sanctification is God at work in us, leading us in the new life which the Christian desires to live. It is only one who is justified that lives a holy, that is, a God-pleasing life. It is only by the power of Christ for us, what He has done and given us, that we live a new life.

But Christians do live holy lives. In today's epistle St. Paul tells us that God's will for us, His saved people, is sanctification, that is, holy living. The Small Catechism describes this quite simply when it tells us what our baptism indicates: "*that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.*"

That is the Christian life. Even as every Lent we hear the same essential story of our salvation, every day the Christian wages the essential war in which he puts the sinful nature to death and rises in Christ, living in Him and His life. Each

day we are called put the sinful nature to death. We all have those impulses, those desires that rise up in us. St. Paul speaks particularly of the temptation to sexual immorality, the passion of lust. There is nothing new under the sun. Jesus says that **“out of the heart come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness”** (Mk 7:21-22).

The Christian, though he is justified by God, still has his sinful nature. Every Christian falls into sin out of weakness. It is like driving through Omaha in this time of year. You are going to hit potholes. Try as you might, they are unavoidable. You hit one and you cringe as your whole car is jolted. Because of our sinful flesh, we sin out of weakness. And it makes us cringe. It brings us sorrow because we know what sin is, that grieves our heavenly Father, and that it pollutes our bodies and souls, which are holy.

The Christian is called to resist sin, avoid and turn from it. St. Paul solemnly warns us that God is an avenger in these things. God is not indifferent to sin. We see His holy and just wrath clearly in the suffering of our Lord. Those who willingly and continually indulge sin and cease to resist it flee out from under the mercy of God in Christ Jesus, and will suffer His vengeance. Sin is no joke, no light amusing thing to God. His Son died for it. Woe then, to those who revel in it! Just as it is nonsensical, insane, to deliberately drive your car into every pothole you see, even more so it is not just insane, but deadly to sin deliberately. The former will wreck your car. The latter, destroys faith. A Christian dare not spurn sanctification.

Rather, the Christian strives against temptation and sin. We do not just pray “lead us not into temptation,” we take steps to avoid sin. The Christian who struggles with impure thoughts or the use of foul language should avoid explicit music and TV shows that entice sinful thoughts. If you are tempted to hold a grudge, to stoke ongoing anger against a person, ask God to soften your heart, but also pray for that person. It is hard to hold contempt for someone when you are asking God to bless and keep them. If you find yourself constantly critical of people, instead of seeing their shortcomings as a basis for criticizing them, offer your help, or again, that is what you can pray for that person.

But the point is, we Christians are not exempt from such sins. We falter in our frailty. We sin out of weakness. God has declared us to be totally holy and righteous in His sight. Yet we do not perfectly live that reality out. We recognize our sins and failures. We are constantly dependent for comfort and consolation not on our sanctification, but on our justification, what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. This is what we see in the Canaanite woman in today’s Gospel. In her daughter’s need she goes to Jesus, whom she confesses to be the Lord, the Son of David, the Messiah. She is a believer. And life’s circumstances drive her to cry out to the Lord.

But the disciples, the Lord’s closest followers, show their weakness, their lack of perfect holiness, by thinking that He has not come for such people as this Canaanite woman. She suffers at the hands of fellow Christians. She then suffers the seeming lack of Jesus’ attentiveness to her cry, that He himself seems to say that He has not come for people like her. But faith clings to Jesus in spite of the hurts we suffer, in spite of the fact that to our eyes and ears the Lord Himself is ignoring us or is mean, and faith doesn’t let go. Faith hears the promises of God in Christ Jesus, who He is, what He has come to do as the Savior of sinners, and faith doesn’t let go.

The woman is praised for her great faith. Who among us wouldn’t want to be praised by Jesus for having great faith? But it is only seen to be great because of what it has gone through. It is the sufferings of life, the weaknesses that we see and endure in ourselves, that drive us to Jesus in faith and in prayer. He is our only help. It is because of who He is, what He has done for us, that we are prompted to flee to Him, to cry out to Him in prayer, to live out our faith in Him, turning from sin, living in love and mercy toward others. May God grant us this through His Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, who once again comes into our midst, to join Himself and the fruits of His sacrifice on the cross to us, that we might live in Him even as He lives in us.