

Fasting, With Joy!
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri
February 13, 2018 – Ash Wednesday

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In the name of the Father, and † of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. When it comes to deciding how one ought to live the Christian life, there are probably as many opinions regarding what that might look like as there are grains of sand on the seashore. If you've ever watched any of the well-known tele-evangelists, you've undoubtedly witnessed some of the more outrageous extremes they promote – giving till it hurts because God is going to “bless your socks off” – praying night and day with endless petitions to god until you wear out the fabric covering your knees and He gives you the desires of your heart – serving others tirelessly because you know how much God loves a cheerful giver and will be well-pleased with your life.

And while most know they need to watch out for the excesses of the TV preachers, at the same time these guys are saying the sorts of things we all enjoy hearing. The bottom line is that the Old Adam within us likes to think that because God is watching how we live our lives there is still a good chance we might gain some sort of rich blessing from Him if we just do things the way we think He wants us to do them. And then along comes Jesus, shouting: “Watch out!” – throwing a wet blanket over all our deeds of righteousness – all those things we do in a vain attempt to store up for ourselves treasures on earth – namely, the praises of others. What a spoilsport that Jesus is!

But the fact of the matter is that Jesus is right to warn you about this. After all, if you do any of those things for the wrong reason – whether it be giving, praying or fasting –

then all you're doing is putting on a show to gain recognition and to set yourself high above everyone else. You're puffing yourself up, trying to impress the world and prove you're better than others, even if that isn't your intent. After all, it is all about you, isn't it? Like it or not, your life is on a one-track perpetual rewards and benefits program – a 24-7-365 justifiable existence.

Do you know what kind of life that is? Dare I say it? Yes, I will. It's a life of bondage and slavery, because you always have to justify who you are and what you do before others – and yes, before yourself, as well. “Watch out,” warns Jesus, and rightly so. “You may receive your reward from people – loads of recognition, positive judgments and kudos, but my Father,” says Jesus, “My Father takes no notice at all.” Listen to the One who died for you and reconciled you to His Father so that He might be your Father also, the One who set you free from your self-imposed, incessant, unbearable, oppressive need to be recognized by others.

When you give to the needy don't put on a show. Knock off all the PR stunts. Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Why? So that your giving will be done *in secret*.” Give anonymously, so that no one knows? “Yes,” Jesus announces. “It's not about you. It's about helping the needy. They are the ones who need your love and help.” But do you really suppose Jesus is going to blow the lid off of how you pray? You bet He is. Listen. “And when you pray,” He says, “don't do it to be seen by others. Remember, it's not about you. Prayer is for the sake of those who

need help – the world, your family, your nation, your Church, the sick, the poor, the dying and the persecuted. When you pray go into your room, shut the door and have a conversation with my Father who is unseen,” says Jesus. “Do your praying there.”

But there’s more. Jesus is also concerned about how you fast. “What’s with this?” He asks. “What’s with all the disfigured, gaunt faces? You make yourself look somber, solemn and grave, hoping others will take notice of what you’re doing. But I’ve got news – it’s not all about you. So clean up your act. Quit being a phony. Wash your face. Freshen up. Go ahead and fast, but nobody needs to know about it. Act normal.” You see, a disciple of Jesus lives differently. He lives his life and serves his neighbor trusting in Jesus, who is the one and only “treasure in heaven.” You have to die to living only for recognition from others so that you set yourself above them. You need to repent of always trying to justify your curved-in-on-yourself existence. You should learn that that type of life simply does not last. It always fails. It always go bankrupt, is eaten by moths, rusts out or is stolen. Earthly fame is fickle. Last Monday’s financial hero is next month’s villain. One day’s praise is the following day’s harsh criticism.

You, as died-for-and-redeemed-by-Jesus disciples, are to serve, not be served. You are to put yourself not above others, but below them. So when you donate, pray and fast, do it for the sake of others just because they need it. True deeds of love will flow naturally from faith in Jesus. That alone is God-pleasing, and your Father, the Father of Jesus, will “see what you do in secret” and

“reward” you. But mind you, this is no salvation “reward.” Heaven forbid! Salvation has already freely been given to you only for the sake of Jesus who died for you, and buried you in His all-atoning-for-your-sin death through Baptism. The “reward” He gives is given not because you’ve earned it, but because His Father loves to give generously. Whatever He gives as a reward is His business, not yours. You have to leave that up to the Lord and His generous giving in all the various ways He does it.

And one of the ways our God and Father is generous is when He deigns to give you one of the most precious gifts of all, one of the most amazing yet least understood of all the things He does for us poor sinners – that is, when He gives us His very own body and blood – the very same body and blood which was given unto death for the life of the world on Calvary’s cross – and all so that we might eat and drink of it for our soul’s salvation – as here at this Altar He bestows on His people His Good Friday forgiveness, strengthens your faith in Him as Lord and Savior, and increases your love for others in your giving, your praying, your fasting or whatever you might undertake in service to God and your neighbor. God wants you to know, dear Christian, that you are forgiven because the Father of Jesus is also your dear Father, and that now you belong to Him forever. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.