

Ash Wednesday

February 17, 2021

Matthew 6:16-21

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The words you heard at the beginning of this evening's service should echo within your head, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Instead, they likely will fade from your memory even before you arise tomorrow and make the sign of the cross, beginning a new day in Christ Jesus.

The thing is, you don't want to hear these words – they speak to your sinfulness, your lack of repentance, and ultimately your mortality.

The pastors are no different, as you approach, we quietly, yet reverently speak the words into your ears as we trace the cross of ash upon your forehead, *"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."*

In seminary, a professor would not only request, but demand to serve during the Ash Wednesday service on campus. In deafening silence, you heard the feet of the Christians shuffle across the cement floor to the front of the seminary chapel and then boom – one by one the professor's voice boldly proclaimed the words as the sign of the cross was traced upon every student, every community member, even the littlest of babes, *"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."* It was if you were participants in a death march.

What brings you to this death march? It's not simply a lack of repentance here or there, rather, it is the continual hardening of your heart toward God and toward your neighbor.

Only in the shadow and whispers of nights as tonight, do we realize this whole life is one complete march to the grave.

We heard in the Lenten address read at the beginning of the service, *"From ancient times the season of Lent has been kept as a time of special devotion, self-denial, and humble repentance born of a faithful heart that dwells confidently [in Christ's] Word and draws from it, life and hope."*

In other words, Lent is a time of fasting. Lutherans, however, have long correlated a fast with the works-righteousness of the Roman Catholic Church. The world often correlates fasting as a discipline for the body to trim-up or lose a little unwanted weight. Yet, another manner of fasting is required prior to having your blood drawn. This fast reveals the true health of your body, the true health of the blood that pumps and flows from your heart and within your veins below the mask of your exterior surface.

So, what does it mean to fast? It means to set aside a time of *“special devotion, self-denial, and humble repentance born of a faithful heart that dwells confidently [in Christ’s] Word.”*

We heard from the prophet Joel in the Old Testament reading *“Yet even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.”* (Joel 2:12-13a)

As you approach this season of Lent - fasting, weeping, and mourning are expectations of the Christian. What is of the most serious importance is what is within you – what is beneath the shell and lies within your heart and pumped throughout your veins.

Jesus said in the Gospel, *“When you fast, do not be like the hypocrites.”* In other words, do not be an actor playing a role within a production or a pretender. But, as Luther writes, *“True fasting consists in the disciplining and restraining of your body, which pertains not only to eating, drinking, and sleeping, but also to your leisure, your pleasure, and to everything that may delight your body or that you do to provide for it and care for it.”* (AE 21:160)

What often occurs when you remove food or leisure from your lives is that you quickly fill the void with drink or other pleasures of this world. While one aspect of life is disciplined, another aspect receives new life.

Disciplining the body is a challenging endeavor for man to engage, one that desires accolades and the approval of others. But, when preparations are done in this manner the true motives of your heart are revealed along with your role as an actor, a pretender, a hypocrite.

Now, what does all of this have to do with the treasure mentioned at the end of the Gospel? Everything.

All that you own, your prized possessions, clothing and food will cease when this life ends. And it will end in dust and ashes. What will remain is the Word of the Lord, what

will remain when this world ceases is eternal life for those in Christ Jesus, what will remain is you the Church.

Around the third century there was a deacon named Lawrence. A deacon was a person that assisted the bishops or pastors; they collected, managed, and dispersed the gifts for the poor and those in crisis.

While Lawrence was serving as a deacon to Pope Sixtus II, the Roman Emperor Valerian declared that Christians would be executed. Lawrence was brought before the Roman officials and ordered to turn over the treasures of the church he had been entrusted to manage and guard. So, Lawrence asked for three days to assemble the treasure and spent those days giving away as much of the wealth as he could to the sick and downcast, those in greatest need.

On the third and final day, the Roman official once again demanded the treasure and Lawrence called together all those who had received the church's treasure and boldly proclaimed to the Roman official, *"These are the treasures of the Church."*

Lawrence would be martyred over the flames of a gridiron. He would become nothing more than dust and ash – yet, he would also receive eternal life in the presence of God the Father as His faith did not waiver.

Lawrence provides a valuable teaching for you this night as you continue your march through this life – you are God's treasure. The saints on your left and your right – those who have sinned against you or those who you have not forgiven – they are your brothers and sisters in Christ and they are also God's treasure. The Church is God's treasure.

We heard, *"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*

Where is your heart?

Tonight, your Lenten fast begins and it begins within your heart. Now is the time to approach the Father with a broken and contrite spirit – seeking reconciliation that comes only through His Son, Jesus Christ. It is His death upon the cross that gives you pardon and peace, and now flows through your veins with the blood of life.

Here in the sacrament, you are given the foretaste of what is to come, the heavenly banquet and marriage feast of the Lamb of God in His Kingdom. It is a foretaste to

sustain you as you journey through this life, as you march to the grave, and as you are brought into the eternal presence of your Father in heaven.

Only in the shadow and whispers of nights as tonight, do we realize that our whole life is one of continual repentance.

Tonight, the sign of the cross was traced upon your heads, just as the cross was traced upon your forehead and your heart at Holy Baptism – to mark you as one redeemed.

While the cross of ash this night reminds you of your mortality, the cross of Good Friday takes your death into Christ Jesus and becomes the instrument of life.

Permit this truth to dwell within your heart as God's Word will give you confidence for the days to come and be your life and your hope. +INJ+

*The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.*

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