

Sermon on Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21, Isaiah 58:1-12
Ash Wednesday, February 9, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
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Today we begin the season of Lent with a dose of reality and a promise from scripture. In the ancient rite of the imposition of ashes, as the sign of the cross is traced on your forehead, you will hear the words *remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return*. It's a reminder of our mortality - that you and I will surely die. The promise comes from the verse from the prophet Joel, part of the gospel acclamation, when we are invited to "*Return to the Lord your God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.*"

Two distinct statements – that both remind us of a truth we would rather not think about, and a truth that invites us into relationship with a God whom we sometimes would rather avoid than embrace! The first has its roots in the ancient Jewish tradition of marking one's head with ashes and donning sackcloth in a sign of grief and repentance – as in the Jewish Day of Atonement. It reminds us of the curse of Adam, who when discovered by God to have eaten fruit from the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God said that Adam would toil all the days of his life. "*By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*" (Genesis 3:19) The sin of all human beings – of going our own way, instead of following God, which leads to death. But when we turn to God, we are promised life!

So the usual Old Testament lesson read on Ash Wednesday is from the second chapter of Joel. But the context is not of repentance for sin, actually. Joel is calling out an alarm to the people that a plague of locusts will swarm over their fields, and eat all their grain – a great calamity, indeed – a disaster of nature. In those days it seems that most believed that such a catastrophe was a judgment sent by God. So the call for repentance is for people to turn to the Lord for help, that God would relent for sending this judgment, and the catastrophe might be averted. "*Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. Who knows, whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him.*"

Such a reading helps us understanding the meaning of repentance – it is a turning to God for help, when you and I are powerless to change the course of events. It is a change in direction and focus – turning our eyes and our faces toward God in prayer, seeking deliverance from peril and death. But perhaps a better text for our context today is the passage we have read from the prophet Isaiah – who actually does mention the use of ashes as a sign of repentance!

For Isaiah asks the question – why do we fast? What is our purpose in putting ashes on our foreheads as a sign of repentance? What is our motivation? Is it merely a religious ritual that we do because that is what we do on this appointed day of the year? Is it for others to see, or is it an act of faith that we do to affect our relationship with God? Why do we do any religious ritual, or act of worship, for that matter? In previous chapters, Isaiah has condemned Israel’s leaders for their corruption and idolatry, and called on the people to repent. He encouraged the faithful to maintain justice and do what is right, to keep the Sabbath and hold fast to God’s covenant, for God’s salvation soon will come and God’s deliverance will be revealed. But God is seeking faith which is genuine.

And then Isaiah reveals what God truly desires from the fasting of God’s people – not an empty ritual, but actual kindness and justice lived out. For why should we fast in religious observance only to quarrel and fight, or to oppress you workers and employees? If so, your fasting and words of worship will not be heard on high. Is it just to bow our heads, or lie in sackcloth and the ashes of repentance – do you and I call this acceptable to God?

Isaiah is very clear in describing the fasting which God desires: *“to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free...to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house, to cover the naked. For then light shall break forth, and you will be healed; you will call and God will answer. If you remove the yoke, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, and offer food to the hungry, then your light shall rise in the darkness, the Lord will guide you and satisfy your needs. Then your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt, and you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.”* (Isaiah 58)

It is easy to misunderstand what God is calling us to do on such a day as this. For generations and for centuries, people of faith have gathered on Ash Wednesday to perform this familiar ritual, confessing our personal sins, kneeling in repentance, clergy making the sign of the cross on our foreheads with ashes made from burnt palm branches, as a sign to God and to others of our humility and our mortality. And there is nothing wrong with that, for it is good for the soul to confess our sins, and it is honest to admit our sins and mortality, in an age and a culture which encourages you and me to live in denial of both!

But here we live in a land which has been built on a multiplicity of sins – the genocide of Native peoples, the enslavement and continued incarceration of African Americans, the rejection of immigrants who come from the wrong countries and so are called “undocumented aliens” – not citizens, not even human beings. All that we have has been attained by our privilege and at great cost to others, while we presume to have “earned it all” ourselves. We live in denial of the damage done to the earth by our prosperity and wastefulness. We have

forgotten the corporate sins from which we have benefitted, and focus on our individual failings and shortcomings, which are the least of God's worries! Instead, Isaiah reminds us that God doesn't care so much for the fasting and the religious show, but rather for the justice and compassion that we as a people show for the "least of these" – those who are oppressed, who are hungry, naked and homeless.

The prophet calls for public justice instead of mere private confession to God for our personal foibles. The repentance called for by God are to acts of compassion for one another, for each of us to reject the prejudice and racism that has infected us and our country since our birth, to stop trying to solve our problems in our own way, and turn to God to guide us in the ways of salvation, by following Jesus' words and example. And God will give us the strength to do so, through faith in God's promises.

Which brings us back to the rituals of repentance which we do today – which are based on the reality of our coming death, our mortality and our sin - done in the midst of our daily lives, in the context of a fallen, sinful world. As Jesus said, we dare not do this just for show, "as the hypocrites do". We kneel in repentance knowing that we all are fallen, sinful human beings. We receive the ashes on our heads in acknowledgment that one day we shall die. But we also receive the ashes in the sign of a cross – because we know that Jesus has died on the cross once, for all – for our sins and those of all humankind, to give us all life! We make this sign of the cross in hope, because we have the assurance that our salvation does not rely upon us and our actions, so we turn our focus on God.

Then we come to the table where our Lord is host, who offers us his own body and blood, shed for you and for me – and for the whole world to have life! We may have come from dust and return to dust, but we also have been wonderfully made by our Creator, and Jesus, God's only Son, invites you and me to come to receive the bread of life! So we return to the Lord our God, who is truly gracious and merciful, whose compassion and steadfast love we see most clearly in the gift of God's Son, who has died for us to give us life forever!

Thanks be to God! Amen.

And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

