

Ash Wednesday
 February 17, 2010
 Jonah 3:1-10; Mathew 6:16-21

Pastor T. Clint Stark
 St. John's LC-MS
 Topeka, KS

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and Our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Today is Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of Lent. "The original period of Lent was only three days: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. By the third century it was extended to the 6 days of Holy Week. Around 800 A.D. during the reign of the Christian emperor, Charlemagne, it was increased to 40 days. The Sundays in Lent are not included. The 40 days correspond to the 40 days in which Jesus fasted in the wilderness in preparation for His battle with Satan."¹ This is also the Gospel lesson for the first Sunday in Lent.

The Gospel lesson for Ash Wednesday, which you just heard, also mentions fasting. In this homily we will cover fasting and some of the other practices associated with Lent.

As you may know, "the day before Ash Wednesday is called Shrove Tuesday. Shrove is the past tense of the word shrive. The word shrive means to cut off, and it means to forgive sins. It was the custom on Shrove Tuesday to go to confession and have one's sins forgiven in preparation for Lent. The day was also one of saying farewell to meat, which is the meaning of the Latin word carnival. So the custom was to use up all the fat in the house by making jelly rolls or pancakes, and to feast on a roast of fat meat. Mardi Gras is the French name for the day, and it means Fat Tuesday."² You probably noticed the many pancake feeds yesterday around town.

"Originally, no meat was eaten during Lent, but this was gradually reduced to only Fridays and Wednesdays when fish was eaten instead."³ There too, you have probably noticed the fast-food menus promoting their filet o fish. Yet, maybe you think fasting, or giving up meat, or giving up something else during Lent is only a Roman Catholic practice and not a good practice for all Christians.

If you look at Jesus' words carefully, He says, "And when you fast..." Jesus implies that Christians will fast at times. But, there is a right and wrong way to fast. **"And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."**

Fasting, much like prayer, isn't a work that we can do to remove God's wrath for our sin. Fasting, much like prayer, isn't something that we should do in order to receive glory from men. Prayer and fasting are for our benefit and do nothing to merit forgiveness from God. This is true of everything we do. We can't do anything to merit God's forgiveness. This is why we reject the non-biblical system of penance in the Roman Catholic Church. This is also why we would reject fasting if we were told that we had to do it to get to heaven. It is sinful to think fasting, or anything else we do, will help appease God. Fasting, prayer, and everything else we do flows from faith and not from a motivation to please God with our effort under the Law. Whatever is not from faith, be it fasting or giving money to the Church, is actually sinful.

¹ Trinity Lutheran Church, Austin, TX – February/March 2010 Newsletter, p.2

² ibid

³ ibid

So, how does God create repentance and faith in dead sinners? Look at Jonah in Nineveh. The Word of God created repentance and faith. **And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.** It wasn't the outward actions of putting on ashes and fasting that pleased God, but the inward repentance and faith that were created by the Word of God through the preaching of a sinful man. Yet, fasting and putting on ashes were fine outward practices of what was going on inside of them. Fasting and putting on ashes would have been sinful if they thought by doing those things they could please God, instead of faith being credited to them as righteousness.

So, I am not telling you that you will be a better person if you give something up for Lent or that those who do are more spiritual than those who don't. But just because some abuse a practice, doesn't mean that it has to be thrown out all together. So, how can it be good to give up something for Lent or to fast?

“Giving up something for Lent is not done to do something for Jesus, the One who did it all for us, but to purposely focus on spiritual things more than on physical things.”⁴ **“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**

So, where is your heart? Do we have other gods? As 100% sinners until we die and return to dust, our evil hearts are never where they should be. We don't fear love and trust in God above all things, but trust more in the treasures of this world. In this penitential season, and every other day of our lives, we must repent of our sins. God's Word always calls us to repent of our sins. And as sinners – we know that we will surely die – and to dust return. And we confess that not only do we deserve the first death, but we deserve eternal death in hell. Lent and Ash Wed. certainly focus our attention on our helpless and sinful situation.

“Yet, the most important thing about Lent is that it is the time when we focus more closely the last week of Christ's life, actually the last two days, where He suffered the most intensely for our sins – also called Christ's Passion.”⁵ The Father knew that there was nothing that we sinners could do to overcome our sins, our dying, and the devil - so He sent His Son to us and for us. Christ won the battle in the wilderness against the devil. So, when we observe the 40 days of Lent, remember that it isn't up to you to defeat the temptations of the devil in the wilderness of this fallen world – Jesus already did it for you. He was tempted like you and me, but never sinned. And remember that no amount of prayer or fasting or anything else that you do could ever pay for your sins. Jesus, however, has paid for all of them, with His innocent blood on the cross.

This forgiveness that Jesus won for you on the cross is given to you in Baptism. This is why the ashes are in the shape of a cross to remind you of the forgiveness that Jesus won on the cross, is given to you in Baptism. Furthermore, Jesus gives you His body and blood for the forgiveness of all your sins and to strengthen your faith until you die. Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Lord, teach us to number our days on earth. And remind us that our days in your heavenly kingdom are numberless. This is how fasting or giving something up

⁴ ibid

⁵ Ibid

can be good. It can be our confession of faith to Our Father in secret that we can do without the treasures of this world. This is the confession of the New Man that God raised in Baptism - that no matter our situation - be it in a wheel chair, in sickness, or with one foot in the grave – we have all we need in Baptism, Communion, and Absolution. We have the forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation. So, you are free to fast or give something up for Lent or not. If you do, that certainly doesn't earn you heaven - Jesus did that for you already - but it still can be a good practice that reminds you of the Gospel. Amen.