

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

Tonight, we have imposed upon our foreheads and upon our very souls an ashen cross. With that imposed cross we are reminded of NOT just the death of the one who dies for us on that cross, we are reminded as well of our own sin, our own guilt, and our own *mortality* because of that sin. But upon our souls is a reminder of the grace and life we are given from that very image that is imposed upon us. This of course is Good News of Jesus Christ.

So, for a few hours or so we walk around with this ashen smudge on our faces for all the world to see...but do they see the meaning of that cross or do they see us as pious Christians following the ritual of Ash Wednesday? Oddly enough then, in our Gospel lesson we hear this warning from Jesus as he preaches on the Mount:

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 6:1)

So, does our piety end when we wash our faces then? Likewise, does our faith end when we leave this gathering here in this place, we call St. Paul Lutheran Church? I think we all would hope that our faith doesn't end when we wash our faces or when we leave...but the bigger question becomes...how then do we reveal the meaning of the cross instead of our own piety?

In the translation before us tonight we hear Jesus say, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them...” It actually reads, beware of practicing your righteousness before others. When I parse this opening warning out from Jesus it reads this way for me: “Do not be addicted to your righteousness.”

Either way it gets parsed out, Jesus is addressing the behavior that stems from our faith. And the righteousness that Jesus is referring to is NOT a moral perfection, Jesus addressing how we live out that faith...individually and with each other collectively as we head out into the world around us and as we head into the season of Lent. And as we piously listen to Jesus preach on the Mount, I pray that he is evoking a question within us that asks ourselves what is this smudge on our face for...what is it really marking?

Part of understanding what tonight is about is understanding that this ashen cross is not just simply marking the beginning of our journey of forty days without booze or chocolate, or some other personal indulgence, nor is it displaying our piety. This cross is a reminder, rather it is our call to discipleship. With this cross, Jesus is challenging us to an understanding of our faith beyond this moment of imposition.

This ashen cross imposed upon us this night marks our call to discipleship...it reminds us that we have been marked with the cross of Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit in our Baptism...and tonight as well...and in this act we are disciples of Jesus Christ who are sent to NOT just tell of the Good News, rather we are sent to be that Good News. This does not just mark the beginning of Lent for us, it is a reminder that we have been called to discipleship. And as always, Jesus is NOT saying this will make us better than others or that our behavior will save us; he's simply saying it's how we ought to view ourselves under that cross individually in the faith and how that faith plays out collectively with others as we go from this place.

This cross, be it an ashen image on our forehead or the oil that anointed our souls at our baptism, this cross is laid on every Christian and is much more than just an image. This cross that hangs on the front wall before us in all its glory and is imposed upon us this night does as Bonhoeffer so brilliantly reminded us when he wrote:

(This cross) ...summons us away from our attachments of this world. It is the death of the old self in the encounter with Jesus Christ. Those who enter into discipleship enter into Jesus' death. They turn their living into dying: such has been the case from the very beginning. The cross is not the terrible end of a pious, happy life. Instead, it stands at the beginning of community with Jesus Christ. Whenever Christ calls us, his call leads us to death.¹

In the early English translation of this passage from Bonhoeffer's book, *The Cost of Discipleship* it read, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." The literal translation is, "Every call of Christ leads into death."² I think we get the idea...the ashen cross is a call to discipleship...discipleship that is not tailored to my likes and dislikes, tailored to my piety or righteousness, rather, this call to discipleship is not about my "stuff," because the call itself calls me to recognize that my understanding is put to death and raised to the understanding and the righteousness according to Jesus Christ and NOT ME.

Nonetheless, even knowing this, we continue to play out or strategize in the dark recesses of our souls, our own righteousness and the reward we humbly figure is ours due to our own efforts of discipleship. This is also what others will see when they look upon this ashen cross on our faces. But our call to discipleship is a reminder as Bonhoeffer so brilliantly points out, that we as Christian disciples of Jesus Christ become bearers of the sin and guilt for other people.

If I truly believe in the grace that I am given on this cross, than I have to believe that same grace and life is given to those out there and even those I dislike, those who live a life that is different than mine, and all those Republicans and Democrats who say either side is evil. In other words, simply put, your guilt and sin is my guilt and sin and yes, if we are the Christians we claim to be, my guilt and sin is your guilt and sin. If I don't believe that grace and life are for those I don't understand and dislike, than I more than likely don't believe it myself.

Tonight, we are reminded that we have been called to discipleship. In this call we are also reminded that there is a warning about righteousness. Jesus is reminding us that this the grace and life we are given in this ashen cross smeared on our forehead is NOT due to our righteousness, nor our correctness of thinking, feeling, and acting, it is a reminder to all who look upon it, of God's righteousness given to us all on this cross. And as others look at the cross on our faces and see our piety, we show the meaning of that cross by revealing the grace that comes from that cross...and we do that knowing that we have taken on their guilt and sin. This cross reminds us all that our God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

So tonight, may we be most mindful that the very cross of ash on our forehead is the mark of *who we truly are*...bearers of grace for all sinners in need of the grace given on that very cross.

¹ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4, Discipleship.* Translated from the German Edition, Edited by Martin Kuske† and Ilse Tödt. Minneapolis, Fortress Press paperback edition: 2003. Chapter Four, "Discipleship and the Cross" Page 87.

² *Ibid.* Page 87, Comments on translations taken from the footnote #11.

May this ashen cross remind us that we are bearers of the words spoken from the one who died upon it...

Father forgive them; (NOT ME) forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.

For behold, this ashen cross displayed on our foreheads does not show *OUR* righteousness, *OUR* devotion and piety, rather it reveals, it signals to all who look upon it...of God's righteous and pious love and faithfulness to all who see it. By the cross God purges us all of our sin and promises new life to all...

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.