

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

Tonight, we mark the beginning of the Holy Three Days we call the *Triduum*. These three days are days set aside for special and intense penitent devotion to celebrate the mystery of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. And we do so within one liturgy. For those who are counting and thinking, but its four days until Easter...Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. The reason it is considered three days is that the Resurrection of our Lord, or Easter, begins with a vigil that begins on Saturday goes through the night until the sunrise on Sunday morning the third day of the *Triduum*. And so, our Easter liturgy began tonight with the *Gloria Patri* at the opening of this service.

Over the past five weeks the intention of our worship during this liturgical season of Lent is that we be penitent while preparing for this very night called Maundy Thursday. And tonight marks the conclusion of our Lenten journey and the beginning of our Easter Service. Like the *Holy Triduum* the intention of this season of Lent is about growing deeper in our relationship with the Lord through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving that reveals Christ's Paschal Mystery...rather, the mystery of Christ's death that destroys our death, Christ's resurrection that restores our life, and his ascension that invites us into the Church Triumphant. Lent can be a good time for us to question ourselves and to honestly assess our understanding of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. As we mark the close of the season, it might be a good time to reflect and discern and ask ourselves, did we, or do we fully understand our Lenten practices?

Lent seems to be quickly associated with the practice of fasting. Lent is a time widely known and observed for giving up either booze, chocolate, or junk food, but its more than that. While fasting is the most widely known practice associated with this holy season, our intentions seem to fall into self-serving measures by becoming an extension of our New Year's resolutions. We give up drinking, snacking or sweets in a two-for-one effort to honor God and emerge at Easter as a healthier person. And while fasting from junk food is not bad, we need to focus more on the intention behind our fasting.

Fasting in a deeper sense is more about self-denial, putting our hunger aside...or putting our stuff aside and focusing on the needs of others...or we can say fasting is taking up our cross. Fasting can be that antithetical parallelism that I spoke of on the last Sunday of Lent when Jesus challenged us to look beyond ourselves and look beyond what we know and what we love. But let's not forget there is more to Lent than just fasting, there is also prayer and almsgiving.

Looking at prayer then, we need to ask...do we fully understand prayer? After all, it seems easy enough...it's just talking to God...right? Yes...and no...prayer is our communication with God—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit but there is more. Prayer is a relationship or our participation with God in both listening and speaking. Prayer is not just about us metaphorically sitting on God's lap and telling God we've been good this year, or what we want. Prayer is also, if not more, about listening to what God is calling us to do or be.

Likewise, almsgiving is a bit more than just donating money or goods to the poor or performing other acts of charity. Looking at the definition of almsgiving, it too may help us to understand the meaning behind the word itself. The roots of the word "alms" can be found in ancient Latin

and Greek words meaning mercy and pity. Similarly, the root of the word “charity” comes from the Latin “*caritas*,” meaning love. Charity, or almsgiving, is an outward sign of Christian love for others.

Through our faith in this season of Lent, we are called through fasting, prayer, and almsgiving to be the love of God in this world as we go from this place not just during these forty days, we call Lent but throughout the year.

Since Christmas, during the opening of our worship, we have been reminding ourselves that we have not been faithful to that call to be God’s love in the world. Our worship confession here at St Paul, has begun with these words since Christmas:

Our Lord Jesus Christ says, a new commandment I give you, that you love one another, as I have loved you. Let us confess to almighty God our failure to receive His love and to share it with others.¹

These are the same words that conclude our Gospel lesson this evening:

³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)

The writers of John’s Gospel have established a scene for us tonight in this Gospel lesson that is centered in this very command from Jesus. This scene set before us is a meal and an act of servant hood set against the backdrop of the very familiar struggle between the powers of good and evil. And that struggle between good and evil becomes manifested in the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. In this betrayal by Judas may we see our own betrayal not just of the command to love our neighbor, but also the betrayal of our Lenten practices set against the good and evil we face within our world today.

Tonight, the scene set for us is after the meal that is John’s acknowledgement of the Last Supper. The focus however is not on the meal, rather the focus is on the foot-washing that we quickly associate with the salvific nature of water and Baptism. But the salvific dimension of this foot-washing scene is Jesus assuming the role of the servant. When he gets up from the table and takes off his outer robe, we can say in this act, Jesus literally gives of himself...not just as a servant who takes off his outer robe...the scene tells us that Jesus gives his life. The Greek verb used when Jesus takes off his robe *τιθησιν* means to lay aside or take off. This is the same verb used when Jesus serves us all by laying down or taking off his life...for us. Or as we will hear Jesus say in few weeks in the Gospel lesson:

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”
(John 10:11)

And with him taking off his robe he is laying down or taking off the things of this world that would keep him from doing what he is doing...loving us to the end...the end within this lesson is not a mark of time, rather the “end” means, fully and completely...Jesus loves us fully or completely.

¹ From the Gathering section of the worship ordo appointed for the Season of Lent 2024 at St. Paul Lutheran Church, Millersville PA.

What I take from the appointed lessons for this evening is the same thing I take from the season of Lent itself...and it is what I suspect some of you gathered here tonight may take as well, and that is that we betray our call...we fall short as people of faith...we fall short as God's Children.

Personally, I do not fast, pray, or give alms as I should or as I am called to do so, nor do I love others as God loves me. But in our heart and through our faith may we know that we are not left to our failures, our shortcomings, or our betrayal of our call in this season of Lent. So, as harsh as we may take this, we can say most assuredly that we are like Judas, in that the devil has also put it in our hearts to betray our call.

The word "devil" in the Greek is *διαβόλου* which means slanderer or slandering...false accuser or accusing falsely, and or that which entices and deceives. We avoid our association with the devil because we tend to read the term "devil" as a noun in the English. But when parsing out the Greek, the word becomes a verb, a verb that we all have fallen prey to by our actions. We may not like our association with Judas here in this passage because none of us would turn our backs on Jesus or none of us would hand him over...but we do...by our sin we betray our Lord. We do so by definition of the term "betray" in that we unintentionally reveal our sins. And we are reminded of this betrayal of our call as people of faith not just during the season of Lent or tonight, but each and every time we gather to participate in this Holy Meal.

Herein is the Good News in this scenario we find ourselves in with Judas tonight. There is no celebration of the Holy Communion that does not recall the fact that this sacrament was first observed in the night in which Jesus was betrayed. We hear this recollection in our Epistle reading for tonight and we hear it in our Eucharistic Prayer each time we celebrate Holy Communion:

IN THE NIGHT in which he was BETRAYED, our Lord Jesus took bread and gave thanks; broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body, given for you." (LBW, Eucharist Prayer 30)

Each time we gather, we gather within the same struggling context of good and evil, we gather in a context set in our betrayal of our call as children of God...but in this Holy Meal we are reminded that our Lord took off, put aside, or laid down his life in the context of betrayal and shows us the fullness of love given to each one of us in the bread and wine of Communion. Tonight, despite the struggles of good and evil within ourselves and within our culture today, despite our betrayal, we know without a doubt that God loves us to the end...loves us fully and completely, nurtures and serves us to the end. This love serves us and frees us of sin and death and this love is what we are literally given and fed in this Holy Meal of bread and wine that is set before us...this bread and wine is the love of God in Jesus Christ.

In this gathering, his presence is once again loving us, forgiving us, teaching us, centering us in His grace and His mercy, and then sending us in service to do the same. In the night he was betrayed, the fullness of the presence of Jesus Christ is revealed and we have all received, grace upon grace, (John 1:16). It is the grace that is upon us throughout these Holy Three Days, it is the new life in the resurrection that we celebrate at the end of these Holy Three days and the grace and life we are promised at the end of our days...

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