

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

Tonight, we gather once again to prayerfully begin our Lenten journey. This somber worship tonight is our prayer that reminds us that we are mortal and in need of reconciliation with God. This is why we impose an ashen cross on our foreheads. This worship is also the start of a period of time for giving, fasting and prayer until sundown on Holy Thursday. The next five weeks of worship will commemorate the forty days Jesus spent fasting and being tempted by Satan in the desert before beginning his public ministry.

But as we return to a deep sense of God in our lives over the next forty days of Lent through these liturgical and pious disciplines, let's not fool ourselves into thinking that this sense of need for God is limited to the forty days of Lent, our need of God and God's grace runs throughout our days until we return to the dust...until we return to the dust.

So, do we then engage with these Lenten disciplines as a practice of our moral standards or beliefs and then as soon as Lent has ended, our behaviors no longer conform to them? Maybe this is why we don't see any need at all for these Lenten disciplines because they do not conform to our lifestyles and we see no need of them beyond these forty days. Maybe we don't practice these disciplines then because we would be hypocritical in our participation? Lord knows, we don't want to be like the hypocrites.

Hypocrite...here is a word that seems to have been lurking around the church for quite a long time and it is being thrown around quite a bit today in our culture and in our Gospel lesson today as well. It's why all the "good people" don't come to church...because there are just too many hypocrites in here. To that I say come and join us we can always use more. This word, hypocrite is used 18 times in the Bible and 2 times in the Apocrypha. And of those 18 times, it shows up 13 times in the Gospel of Matthew alone and 3 times tonight in our Gospel lesson. Hypocrisy is the practice of claiming to have moral standards or beliefs to which one's own behavior does not conform. We all know a hypocrite, don't we? I face one every morning in the mirror when I brush his teeth and shave his face. And this evening in this Gospel lesson, Jesus makes it very clear that he is incensed with hypocrisy.

And let's face it, it is our sense of hypocritical religion that has wounded others and what has turned many away from the church. Jesus, like any of us, is not happy with things not being what they claim to be. Oh, we can fool ourselves into thinking we are righteous, but who are we really fooling and who are we really hurting? This is what Jesus is getting at tonight in this Gospel lesson and this is what this ashen cross on our foreheads is reminding us of once again tonight. Tonight, we hear Jesus saying to his disciples,

“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.” (Matt. 6:1)

We hear this word “piety” being used in this translation and we know that piety is the unthinking reverence that our faith manifests within us. But looking closer at the opening sentence of our Gospel in the Greek, Jesus is saying:

Pay close attention to the righteousness you (make, cause, bring about, or effect) in front of others in order to be seen by them as a spectacular performer.<sup>1</sup>

If our piety is insincere, it then stems from the hypocrisy of a faith twisted by the self because our piety is the fruit of our faith. Our faith is as Jesus says, it is salt, and like salt it not only enhances us, it enhances others around us. So, Jesus is more or less saying to us tonight, is our piety drawing attention to ourselves, or is it helping others?

Here is the hypocrisy that Jesus is addressing tonight, is our faith self-serving or self-aggrandizing or is it enhancing and serving another's faith or serving and loving our neighbor, as they are and not as we *want* them to be? Have we twisted our faith into something that has nothing at all to do with faith or the way of Jesus? Does our faith merely serve ourselves? How does our piety and our pious practices become enacted in our community and in the world around us? Do they enhance and elevate others or ourselves?

We can all claim a strong faith and a pious heart because we go to church or that we *say* that we are Christian, but is our faith and our piety undergirded by *our* terms and *our* ways or do we follow the way of Christ. Are we as Bob Dylan claims when he wrote about his conversion to Christianity in his song that says:

“You remember only about the brass ring –  
you forget about the Golden Rule.”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, is our faith and piety genuine until it gets in the way of our agenda or our desires? Do we follow our Lenten disciplines and piety until it calls us to change our perspectives, our minds, and most of all our hearts? Or, does our faith and piety push us to follow Jesus more closely and more sincerely?

One of the chief things about Jesus is that he practiced humility. Jesus had all the wealth of heaven and was adored by the angels, and was content to be a poor man, with nowhere to lay his head. And though he was without sin, he never lost his feel for the glory of any human being. He never lost his love for sinners. And what did *we* say about him, he was a friend of sinners, that he was willing to associate and even eat with tax collectors and sinners<sup>3</sup>...BUT...BUT...tonight he eats with us again as he does every time we gather around this Holy Meal to feed and strengthen our faith and our piety. Our piety is our inner experience of God expressed through our *sincere-unthinking* behavior and reverence toward the presence of God, our neighbors, and others in the world. Our piety is the personal physical manifestation of our faith. Our piety begins first and foremost with the recognition of our sin and our need for God and God's grace given in Jesus Christ through our faith. In other words, we are the hypocrites that are dust, and to dust we shall return...but from that dust we have the promise of the resurrection we share with Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> This translation is juxtaposed with what I parsed from the Greek along with, Kenneth S. Wuest, teacher emeritus of New Testament Greek at the Moody Bible Institute found in his book, *The New Testament, An Expanded Translation*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1961. Page 13.

<sup>2</sup> “Gonna Change My Way of Thinking,” Bob Dylan, Phonographic Copyright (©): CBS, Inc. (original 1979 release), later Sony Music Entertainment Inc, 1979, track 1 side 2.

<sup>3</sup> “Borrowed” from Pastor Gregory P. Fryer, Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY 2/25/2009, Ash Wednesday Sermon text, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

This ashen cross that will be placed on our foreheads is not a mark of our righteousness, our glory, or our piety, rather it is a mark showing the world that we are hypocrites, we are sinners who despite our hypocrisy, our sin and death receive grace from the very cross we have been marked with...it is a mark of our grief for our sin...it is a sign, a reminder for all who look upon it of *God's* reconciliation with us through this cross.

So tonight, as our journey through Lent begins, let's not fool ourselves into thinking we are righteous, but recognize who we are really fooling and who we are really hurting with our hypocritical sense of faith. Tonight, placed on our head is the mark of *who we truly are...*a hypocritical sinner who is dust and by that hypocritical sin we will return to the dust.

The very cross of ash on our head is telling you, me, and all who see it that from that very dust placed on us we live with the hope and grace given on that very cross. This dust displayed for all to see is the sign of God's devotion to us, God's saving love for us, it is the sign of new life for us all and for all who see it. For behold, this ashen cross displayed on our foreheads does not show *OUR* righteousness, *OUR* devotion, and *OUR* piety, rather it reveals, it signals, and it shows all who look upon it...God's righteous and devout love and faithfulness to us made know to all on the very cross placed on us. By the cross God has purged us of our sin and promised new life to us...

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