

Ash Wednesday
17 February, Anno Domini 2021
St. Matthew 6:16-21
Pastor Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Moment of truth. We all love to be noticed. We all love for others to be watching when we do something well. We love when people fawn over us and tell us how nice and helpful and selfless we are. We want everyone to think we've got control over our lives, that we've got it together. We hope people notice the sacrifices we make and feel some sympathy for us. We love to let others know about our generosity. We want other people to be as convinced of our genius as we are.

Hear again Jesus' words "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites who disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others." That word hypocrite refers to one who puts on a mask, an outward show to hide the truth of what lies beneath. Isn't that a great way to describe us sinners – mask wearers? We feverishly work to make sure that the rest of the world thinks well of us, that they believe we are gentle, kind, compassionate, slow to anger, obedient Christians, loving husbands, dutiful wives, faithful children – all around morally upstanding individuals. Putting on a show like that is exhausting, especially because we are having to work extra hard to get ourselves to believe it.

I've got some bad news for you. The Father sees. Your heavenly Father knows the truth. He sees what remains a secret to the rest of the world. He sees right past your best efforts and most convincing shows. All the pretending in the world can't hide the deep, dark, awful truth about all the things you would do if you thought no one was looking or if you believed you could get away with it. It's the reality that our Old Adam hates the most and works the hardest to make us forget. We so easily fall into the trap of believing that if our fellow man thinks well of us we must be doing something right, we must be decent people. But unless your righteousness **exceeds** that of the scribes and Pharisees – and boy did they ever put on a convincing show – you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

What God sees, we often won't even admit to ourselves. He sees how when we think of our sin, we don't give a whole lot of thought to the first three commandments and our love of Him. He sees how good we are at making up our own commandments that are much more keepable. He sees how little we actually trust His Word, how we barely give our Baptism a second thought, how little we

hunger and thirst for the Sacrament of the Altar. He knows how little time and attention we give to meditating on His Word. He knows the real reason we withhold our first fruits from Him. He watches as we waste time, money, and energy on things that will one day perish, things that are actually harmful to us. He sees the truth about what we think of our neighbor. He sees the grudges that we are holding against our spouse. He knows the cruel things we want to say about our brothers and sisters and classmates. We may be embarrassed when other people get a peek at our darker side, but it should terrify us when we consider what God knows about us. It is His holy Word that we have sinned against. It is His beloved Son whom we crucify again as we plunge ourselves over and over again into sin. He is the judge to whom we must answer and no one else.

As we begin Lent, I imagine some of you are considering fasting from something. The temptation will be to let others know about your fasting so that they are impressed and praise your Christian devotion. That's what our Old Adam wants us to be satisfied with – the empty praises of men. But these are only empty treasures, if you can call them treasures at all. The praises of men are like robbers that break into your soul and steal away the real treasure – your trust in Christ, your dependence on His mercy and forgiveness, the sheer joy of salvation accomplished apart from anything you have done.

Repent. Lent, and indeed, your whole life, should be a time for rending your hearts – taking off the mask and standing before unmasked, totally exposed, confessing your sin rather than trying to hide it, rationalize it, or explain it. Return to the Lord without any pretense. Stand before His throne as a beggar. Fast, weep, and mourn – not over your reputation but over your sin and rebellion, over your apathy toward the things of God, over your love of the things of this world. Repent because the Lord is gracious and merciful. He doesn't desire your death. He loves you.

It is because of what He sees in us that we even have this season of Lent. It is because the Father looked upon your wretched and lost state and had compassion on you. It is because the Father sent His only-begotten Son into our sinful flesh to suffer the rejection of sinners, the betrayal of His dear friend, the sting of the whips, and the searing pain of the nails – all for you, all so that instead of dying for your sin, you would be forgiven and live forever with Him. Jesus, for our sakes, endured temptation and suffering and kept the only true fast – the fast from sin. Never once did He give His heart, His eyes, His mind, or His hand to evil. Without an ounce of doubt He entrusted Himself completely to the love and keeping of His Father, even as the thorns were pressed into His brow and God the Father turned His face away from His beloved Son. And now Jesus' fast is your

feast as your soul is filled with the Bread of Heaven that awaits us this day/night on the altar.

That is the treasure in heaven that you have been given – the Body and Blood of the Son of God, shed for you. These priceless treasures are yours by virtue of your Baptism. In the blessed sacraments we have been given the grain, wine, and oil God promised us through the prophet Joel. You didn't earn them. You never could, whatever people say of you. They are pure, undeserved, free gifts from the Triune God gladly given to you, the wretched sinner whom He has adopted as His own dear child. His steadfast love for you drove Him to offer up the perfect sacrifice to make atonement for you and for the sins of the whole world.

So come, let us blow the trumpet and consecrate a fast, all of us together – from the infant to the one who has lived a hundred years. Let us all together receive in humility the ashes that remind us of the terrible curse of death that our sin has brought upon us. Let us truly repent, holding nothing back, abandoning all attempts to save face with men. Let us lift up the voice of weeping and cry out to the Lord “Spare your people, O Lord, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword, among the nations.” Then let our weeping turn into dancing and let our fasting come to end. Even though this night and this season begin with confession and ashes, both this night and this season will end with shouts of joy and hymns of praise, with forgiveness and the healing balm of Christ's Body and Blood, crucified and risen for you.

In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.