

Ash Wednesday  
2 March, Anno Domini 2022  
St. Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21  
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

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

In the fifth chief part of the Small Catechism the question is asked “What is confession?” We might also ask “What is repentance?” Lent, as we are reminded of through the readings, through the change in the color of the paraments and vestments, and through the hymns, is a season filled with calls to repentance. But what is that? What truly is repentance? What does it look like? If we are going to spend the next six weeks preparing for the death and resurrection of our Savior, we would be wise to understand true preparation. After all, Jesus’ own preaching began with the word “Repent.” Teach us true repentance, O Lord.

Lent for many is spent doing without certain comforts that they’ve grown accustomed to - food, spending, TV. We indulge ourselves on Fat Tuesday and then give it up the next day. It’s like a reset button on those New Year resolutions. It’s a time to simplify. But that wasn’t really ever the intent. Doing those things can be beneficial but that isn’t the true preparation for Good Friday and Easter.

The true preparation goes much deeper and, frankly, is much more uncomfortable than hunger or boredom. Food and TV and buying things aren’t sin. They are distractions. True repentance doesn’t come from giving something up. It begins by adding something that none of us do as nearly as much of as we should - meditating honestly on God’s Word, listening and examining your life in light of the commandments, pondering the great depth of your sin that could not be paid for with anything less than the crucifixion of God. It begins by recognizing that there is nothing you can do - wearing ashes, praying, fasting, giving alms - that could make atonement for your guilt. It comes as you feel God’s perfect vision piercing through flesh and bone to stare right into your soul, leaving you nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. He sees past the hypocritical masks you put on. Man may be fooled. The Lord is not. He sees how little you trust Him. He sees how little interest you have in His Word. He sees how you have mocked your co-workers and turned up your nose at those who are suffering because it would be too big a sacrifice to help. True preparation is to stand completely naked before God - no excuses, no lies, no fig leaves to cover up your guilt. It is to acknowledge what God already knows - that your heart, your mind, your mouth are filled with

sin and shameful wickedness. True repentance begins with a conscience stricken with utter terror at the thought of God's righteous judgement.

The truth is that repentance isn't something you do. It is something that God in His mercy works in you. He does this because He wants you to approach Him in need, asking for mercy, not trying to buy it with works and empty promises. God must first bring you to nothing, show you that what He has said is evil is truly evil and harmful to you and that you have left yourself in a very dangerous position by participating in sin. True repentance is a fear of the evil you have done AND a desire to be cleansed and forgiven AND to turn away from what is wicked.

Only by showing you the great depth of your sin can your Father then show you the great depth of His love. And that is what He desires you to know. Remember, confession has two parts. The first, yes, is that we confess our sins, we acknowledge our depravity before God. But the second is what confession is really all about. True Christian, God-pleasing confession isn't complete when you are sorry for you sin. It's complete when you are absolved, when the sweet word of forgiveness is proclaimed to you, forgiveness which Christ has purchased by His death, the death that should be ours, the death that causes us such great terrors of conscience. Repentance, the season of Lent, the black, the fasting - these things aren't simply about making you feel sad. If that's all repentance is about, then it is a colossal waste of time. But that's not what repentance is about. We ought to be terrified of our sin. But the end of repentance, the end of confession, is forgiveness. And the conscience that is plagued by it's guilt, the timid soul that languishes in the fear of eternal judgment, can find no greater peace than in those very simple and familiar words "In the stead and by the command of my Lord, Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

That is why we gather this night. That is why the next 40 days we devote special time and attention to God's Word, not to feel bad, but to gain an even greater appreciation of the great love and mercy of God which has poured out of the veins of His Son. There is no more beautiful sight to the penitent than that of Jesus hanging on the cross, where the sinner belongs. That is what repentance is about. That is what Lent is about. It is about shedding all that clouds our hearts and minds from seeing Good Friday for what it is - the victory of God over our sin. It is about the ashes of death being washed away in the flood of Holy Baptism which swept away sin and robed us in the perfect righteousness of Jesus.

But this isn't just something for the next 40 days. This is our joy each and every day. That is the daily work of the Holy Spirit. Through the Christian Church "He daily and richly forgives all your sins and the sins of all believers." The whole life of the Christian is one of repentance - confessing and being absolved, mourning and rejoicing. Every week we are blessed with the opportunity to stand again before our Creator and Redeemer and receive the precious Word of healing and forgiveness. Every Friday and whenever you need to hear it, I sit right here in the stead and by the command of Christ to proclaim forgiveness to all who seek it. Here, we join our brother and sister repenters around the fellowship of Christ's table where the feast of salvation is spread before us - Body and Blood, given and shed for you.

So do not be afraid. Do not brace yourself against the preaching of repentance. Do not let it run off you like water off a duck's back. Let it reach deep into your soul. Let it root out the darkness. Let it cut out the rot that tries to hide and consume you. Confess. It isn't a sad thing. Repentance is a joyous thing, a priceless treasure. Confess. And then let your eyes turn to Jesus who has willingly suffered the Father's wrath against your sin to spare you. Remember the waters that gave you new life. Remember the Blood of the new testament whereby you have been purified of all unrighteousness. Here are all things that pertain to life and godliness and they are freely given you and to all who seek them. Repent, not so that, but BECAUSE Jesus forgives you.

In the Name of +Jesus.

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keeps your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus.