



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

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Ash Wednesday: February 17, 2021

Sermon Title: "Beloved Dust"

Gospel Text: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent – a time of forty days and six Sundays. It's a time for repentance, rebirth, renewal, and recommitment to Christ as we prepare for the celebration of Easter. Today's Gospel provides us with three specific *gifts* – three *tools* of the Christian life – to help us achieve this Lenten purpose. They are the traditional Lenten disciplines of almsgiving, praying, and fasting.

These ancient practices of giving to the poor, praying more regularly, and occasionally foregoing food in order to bring our bodies under the discipline of our souls, are simple but effective ways of recommitting ourselves to what Jesus called the two great commandments: loving God and loving your neighbor. That is the very essence of the Christian life.

There will be times in our lives when intensifying our commitment to these faith practices will feel like God's *Law* – an oppressive obligation we undertake mostly out of fear. Sometimes God *does* use the *Law* to wake us from our apathy and lethargy. But eventually we realize that this is *Gospel* – *Good News* - God's *gift* to us of the very things that help us live a life that is more meaningful, purposeful, and joyful. It's the spiritual equivalent of God telling us to eat our vegetables and drink lots of water because it will keep us healthier and happier.

But today's Gospel also points out the very human risks we incur by undertaking these intensified faith practices during Lent. As we increase our *giving*, we will be tempted to want others to *know*, so that we can be *praised*. As we *pray* more, we will be tempted to want others to *see* us and be impressed by our piety. And as we *fast* more, we will be tempted to mention to our friends how *hungry* we are or to brag about all the chocolate we've given up, hoping that they will notice our sacrificial faithfulness.

Jesus cautions us not to do that. Don't undertake these faith practices in order to be praised or noticed by others, because then you've received your reward. Instead, do these things quietly, privately, in secret, because then you'll be doing them for the right reasons, namely, love for God and love for your neighbor.

So here's the dilemma that Ash Wednesday causes. If Lent is about increasing our love for God and neighbor by undertaking faith practices in *secret*, then why do so many of us walk around with ashen crosses on our foreheads or hands all day long? Isn't such a public display a direct contradiction of our Gospel lesson's warning not to seek attention?

Well, at least in this day and age of declining faith, the answer is *no*. I don't think anyone is going to praise us just because we went to church or got a smudge of ash on our body. We're probably more likely to be laughed at than lauded. So no, I don't believe receiving ashes today is an attention getting device that is contrary to the spirit of our Gospel lesson.

So what purpose then *will* these ashes provide to us the rest of this day, as we see them and reflect upon them? These ashes help us remember two important things. First, we remember that we are dust. This is an honest acknowledgement that we are sinners. We fall short. We will one day die and return to dust, and there is nothing we alone can do about it. Without God's help and intervention, we are here one day and gone the next, carried away on a breeze. It's humbling to realize we are dust.

But these ashes remind us of a second truth: we are beloved. Despite our brokenness, our sinfulness, and our very human limitations, each of us is known to God and cherished by God. God offers to take our dust and form, reform, and transform us into God's treasured children, people with eternal futures who by God's grace will not blow away into obscurity like *dust*, but soar even *higher than the angels*.

By humbly acknowledging that we are dust, and trusting in the even greater truth that we are beloved by God, we are able to live this life in confident hope, trusting not in our own merits but in the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ, whose victory over sin and death was achieved not for *his own* sake but for *ours*. This sort of remembering is vitally important in our faith journey. But the ashen cross helps us more than just remember; in a world full of false gods it also points us to our true treasure in Jesus.

And so friends, Ash Wednesday offers us the security of God's love and salvation so that we no longer need to seek the praise and attention of a fickle world or vainly seek to save ourselves. Freed of those burdens, we are freed to love and serve both our *God* and our *neighbor*. How? Well, why not start with the three traditional faith practices we've discussed today: almsgiving, praying, and fasting. Do them out of joy, not fear. Do them out of love, not to get attention. Do them, because, as the ashen cross proclaims, *you are beloved*. Thanks be to God. Amen.