

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

It is our custom here at Zion to gather on Ash Wednesday, to be reminded of our mortality with a mark of ash on our head, to confess our sins and be absolved, to eat Christ's body and blood to strengthen our faith in God for the season we are entering. It has become our custom to be exhorted to "the observance of a Holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's Holy Word."

Zion didn't always observe Ash Wednesday in this way — especially having that cross-shaped smudge of ash put on our foreheads. It just calls too much attention to oneself. And well, Lutherans don't fast — that's for Roman Catholics, some mutter under their breaths.

Of course, God is not into empty rituals — that is, doing something simply for show, but without real piety. Surely that's what Jesus was talking about as He begins this section of His Sermon on the Mount. He begins: "*Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.*"

That's the warning, isn't it? "*In order to be seen by them*"? For your own ego? In order that others may see you and give you praise? After all, surely Jesus is not telling faithful people to refrain from doing works of righteousness at all! He had just finished a long exhortation to holy living, to a "*righteousness [that] exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees*" (Matt. 5:20), calling believers to love even their enemies. And He concludes that section of the sermon with the exhortation to "*be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Matt. 5:48).

Jesus wants His followers, first, to be faithful, but He wants them also to follow His example of doing good to all (Acts 10:38). Indeed, He expects that. He doesn't say "if you do works of mercy," but "*when you do*" them (ὅταν). He expects His disciples to "*do ... to [others]*" "*whatever you wish that [they] would do to you.*" We call this the Golden Rule and suspect that everyone understands it naturally, but actually Jesus says that this is God's will in "*the Law and the Prophets*" (Matt. 7:12). Jesus expects that "*healthy tree[s]*" will "*bear good fruit*" (Matt. 7:17) — it's what they do.

Similarly, as Jesus moves on in our text to talk about prayer, He is not trying to deter our prayers. He commands them; He expects them. Again, He does not say, "if you pray," but "*when you pray.*" The point simply is not to call attention to oneself to "*be seen by others*" or to "*be heard for [your] many words.*" Rather, Jesus teaches the Lord's Prayer and invites us to pray it (Luke 11:2).

Similarly again, Jesus moves on to talk about fasting. It's hard to understand how Lutherans have become so opposed to fasting, except to say it's from an anti-

Roman Catholic bias, for remember Luther did teach that “fasting and bodily preparation are certainly fine outward training” (Luther, Small Catechism, Sacrament of the Altar, “Who receives this sacrament worthily?”). Luther surely practiced it and would have thought it odd that many Lutherans today do not.

Moreover, whether in the Old Testament or in the New, fasting is a practice encouraged. The prophet Joel, speaking for the Lord, said, “*return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.*” And Jesus again taught, “*when you fast*” — so He rather expected it, too.

But we should not think that fasting itself is meritorious. It’s not. There are no promises attached to our fasting. The braggart tax collector boasted before God that he “[fasted] twice a week” (Luke 18:12), and it did him no good. He was not justified because of it.

For you see, in all of this, it’s not about the doing of the act, but the motivation and the purpose. If the fasting or the praying or the works of mercy are about bringing yourself attention or giving yourself glory — “*to be seen by others,*” then they are being done for the wrong reason.

And we might add, smearing your forehead with some black ash. If it is done to bring you praise, then it’s done for the wrong reason.

I pray that’s not why you do it. Of course, at Zion, we do it at night, and most of us will go home right away, and we’ll wash off that smudge before we go to bed tonight. But many have gotten that cross smeared on their foreheads early in the morning and have worn it all day. People would have seen it and marked it, and they may even have asked about it.

Perhaps some may have responded: “Oh, yes. Look at me. I’m so pious.” But I pray that’s not you. Rather, you should be ready to respond with a brief, “this cross of ash on my forehead is a reminder of my sin and sin’s consequence — death, for I am dust and to dust I shall return. I wear it as a sign of my repentance for my sins. But the cross is especially a reminder of my Savior, who took on sin and death for me and burst forth from the grave victorious, winning for me forgiveness and life.”

Some years back, I remember Molly Hemmingway on TV on Ash Wednesday; she had a big ol’ black ash cross on her forehead as she opined. Later on Twitter, people were disturbed by it: “Molly, there was this big black blob on your forehead. What was that?” And Molly, the good Lutheran that she is, had opportunity to bear witness, not to herself, but to her Savior, Jesus, crucified for her.

That's why we do it here at Zion now. That's why it has become our custom — not that you have to; you're simply invited to participate. It's not for personal accolades. We do it to remind us truly who we are by nature: sinners destined for death and the grave, and apart from Christ, destined for hell; but with Christ and His bloody sacrifice on the cross, we are redeemed sinners destined for life, sinners with hearts rent in repentance, but also sinners with hearts that truly know our treasure: Jesus, priceless treasure, sinners who are laying up treasures in heaven.

God grant us a blessed Lent, with prayer, with acts of mercy, with devotion to God's word, and perhaps even with fasting. And God grant us an opportunity to tell others of the marvelous things He has done.

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit.