

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

What are we doing here tonight with that black cross traced on our forehead? “*Practicing [our self-] righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them*”? I think not. We are no legalists. We make no claim that by this act of piety you are meriting anything from God. We’re not commanded to do this, and there is no grace promised in this ash paste. To be sure, there is in the absolution, but not in that black mark on your face ... not even in the contrition you displayed or the confession you made. Surely, it’s not about our righteousness.

Why then? Are we making a public show that we have given our hearts to Jesus? Again, I think not, though the word “heart” does have a prominent place in our texts tonight. Still, I think not. Our heart is not something to give to our Savior.

If you read my contribution in February’s Voice, I hope you remember the little vignette that I included from Bishop Bo Giertz’ *The Hammer of God*. It’s a favorite story of mine and memorable. I recount some of it here.

Recall, here’s the scene: an assistant pastor — Fridfeldt his name — is meeting his supervising pastor for the first time and is trying to make a good impression. He’s a believer, he assures his supervisor. I pick up the conversation with the supervisor’s response:

“I ask only what it is that *you* believe in.’

“In Jesus, of course,’ answered Fridfeldt, raising his voice. ‘I mean—I mean that I have given him my heart.’

“The older man’s face became suddenly as solemn as the grave.

“Do you consider *that* something to give Him?’

“By this time, Fridfeldt was almost in tears.

“But sir, if you do not give your heart to Jesus, you cannot be saved.’

“You are right, my boy. And it is just as true that, if you think you are saved because you give Jesus your heart, you will not be saved. You see, my boy,’ he continued reassuringly, as he continued to look at the young pastor’s face, in which uncertainty and resentment were shown in a struggle for the upper hand, ‘it is *one thing* to choose Jesus as one’s Lord and Savior, to give Him one’s heart and commit oneself to Him, and that he now accepts one into His little flock; it is a very different thing to believe on Him as a Redeemer of sinners, of whom one is chief. One does not choose a Redeemer for oneself, you understand, nor give one’s heart to Him. The heart is a rusty old can on a junk heap. A fine birthday gift,

indeed! But a wonderful Lord passes by, and has mercy on the wretched tin can, sticks his walking cane through it and rescues it from the junk pile and takes it home with Him. That is how it is.’” (Bo Giertz, *The Hammer of God*, p. 147, Augsburg Publishing House.)

I submit: that’s what the black cross on your forehead signifies, that you are “a rusty old can on a junk heap”; you were a “wretched tin can” before the Lord had mercy on you and rescued you. “*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ, our Lord*” (Rom. 7:25)!

Yes, on a junk heap, that’s where Adam’s sin and the iniquity with which we were brought forth into this world cast us ... onto a trash heap. We call it hell, and that is the destination for all who have trashed their lives by sin, who ultimately reject Him “*who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna*” (Matt. 10:28). Gehenna ... back in Jesus’ day that was the trash heap, the place where the fires burned without ceasing, fueled by sulphur; it’s where the dead who were homeless or criminals were cast and consumed by the fire. It’s an image that Jesus uses for eternal destruction.

The ash on our foreheads was produced by fire — I burned it. It’s a reminder of our mortality — that the ancient curse for Adam’s sin is death, and we also are marked by the curse. You “*are dust, and to dust you shall return*” (Gen. 3:19), for Adam’s sin was passed on to you. Not only that, but you have also added your own sins to the list of charges against you. Our sentence is death — you will die. There’s no record that Adam said this, but I can imagine he also did: “*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*” (Rom. 7:24).

God would, for God did not leave Adam in his wretched state without hope; He made a promise. An offspring will come forth from the woman. He will be the Savior. He will rescue you from sin and death. He will pull you from the junk heap on which your sin cast you. We know that offspring. He is Jesus, and that’s why the ash on your forehead is in the shape of a cross. For, on the one hand, Adam’s sin caused our condemnation, but on the other hand, Jesus’ righteous life and His perfect suffering and death are our salvation.

He is your rescue. You are no longer accounted a criminal, but are accounted righteous before God for the sake of Jesus. You are no longer homeless, but you have a mansion that He has prepared for you. He comes to pluck us, wretched people that we are, from the junk pile and take us home with him.

He does it, not we by us giving our hearts to Him. He does it by making us new ... a new creation. He does it, creating in us new hearts ... clean hearts and right spirits ... hearts that acknowledge our wretchedness, but hearts that are ever returning to the Lord, hearts that are rent in grief over our sin and heads covered with the ash of repentance — like the ash on your foreheads tonight.

The Lord does this sprinkling us with clean water, the Spirit-filled water of Holy Baptism. By this water, He cleanses us from all our uncleannesses; He cleanses us from all our idols. He gives us His Spirit, who leads us to the Son, who makes Jesus our treasure, who sets our hearts on Jesus by faith. He does it.

Why have we marked our foreheads tonight with ash in the shape of a cross? It's not a parade of our own righteousness. It's an acknowledgement that we are rusty old cans who have been rescued from the junk pile by our Lord, who came into our flesh and went to a cross for us that He might take us home with Him.

Whether you fast this season or not is up to you. If you do, use the meals you forego for increased devotion to prayer and the Word. But especially let us devote this season to repentance, to rent hearts returning to the Lord, to broken spirits and contrite hearts, to Jesus Christ, the crucified. Let us rejoice in hearts made new by the Lord, looking to Him, our priceless treasure.

God grant you a holy Lent.

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