

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

We Lutherans have been observing Ash Wednesday as the beginning of the season of Lent, putting ashes on our heads, for some time. I know that some people object: “we never used to do that.” Others object to other common Lenten disciplines ... fasting, for example, thinking “it’s too catholic”.

The objections are not that these things are contrary to the Scriptures. Indeed, they’re not, though radical Christians claim that “participation in Ash Wednesday and Lent strikes at the gospel itself”; that “[b]y participating in Ash Wednesday and Lent, we are saying that [Christ’s] sacrifice was not enough. We are saying that somehow we must add to what He did on the Cross. We are demeaning His work by” this participation (Timothy J. Hammons, “Protestants Don’t Celebrate Ash Wednesday, or Lent. We Are Protestant For a Reason.” revfrankhughesjr.org/images/Protestants_Don_t_Celebrate_Ash_Wednesday.pdf). I don’t know where this author I’m quoting got those ideas. In fact, he’s wrong, and thanks be to God that Lutheran objections are not so ill informed.

Lent is a season of repentance as we move through these forty days to the cross and Christ’s great resurrection victory. And repentance, at least in the Old Testament, was done “*by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes*” (Dan. 9:3). The prophet Joel declares the LORD’s command: “*Yet even now ... return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;*” (Joel 2:12).

And even though the New Testament doesn’t record Jesus donning sackcloth and ashes, He certainly prayed and fasted. Moreover, Jesus expects His hearers to fast: “*And when YOU fast, ...*,” Jesus preached. No, as I said, one objection often is: “We never did it that way before; I don’t like the change,” bringing to mind the joke: “How many Christians does it take to change a light bulb?” For Lutherans, the answer is “none. Lutherans don’t believe in change.”

Well, take heart any of you out there who refuse to have your forehead smeared with this black, ashy paste. Your refusal does not make you a sinner, any more than having it done makes you righteous in the sight of God. We Lutherans have not changed our belief with regard to meriting salvation, either. “[B]y works of the law no human being will be justified in [God’s] sight ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Rom. 3:19, 23-25).

No, the admonitions we heard from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount are not calls to refrain from fasting any more than He wants us to refrain from giving “*to the needy*” or refrain from praying. He calls us to all of these: “*when you fast,*”

“when you give,” “when you pray.” He wants His disciples to do these things. How else can one reconcile what Jesus said earlier in the Sermon? “*You are the light of the world. ... people [don’t] light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works ...*” (Matt. 5:14-16).

Well, does Jesus want us to do good works that can be seen by others, or doesn’t He? Rest assured. He is not arguing against Himself.

Surely, the issue is not about good works! Jesus desires them; He commands them; and we Lutherans teach their necessity. The Augsburg Confession says: “Our churches teach that this faith [justifying faith] is bound to bring forth good fruit It is necessary to do good works commanded by God ..., because of God’s will.” However, “We should not rely on those works to merit justification before God” (*Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, AC, VI: 1).

The issue is not really even about the eyes, even though Jesus says “*so that they may see your good works*” in one place, and later says, “*Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them*” Give, but not as the hypocrites do; give “*in secret.*” Don’t pray “*like the hypocrites ... [who] love to stand and pray in [public places], that they may be seen by others.*” Again, don’t fast “*like the hypocrites, [who want] their fasting [to] be seen by others.*”

No, the issue really is about the motivation. The issue is about the heart. Jesus warns in our Gospel lesson about those who give to the needy and pray and fast “*that they may be praised by others.*” They are seeking their own glory. The earlier, outward good works that Jesus encouraged were to be done so that others “*may see*” them “*and give glory to [the] Father who is in heaven*” (Matt. 5:16).

Giving and praying and fasting for one’s own glory is but laying “*up for [oneself] treasures on earth,*” and these do not last. “[M]oth and rust destroy” them. “[T]hieves break in and steal” them. They are the kinds of things that Jesus calls in a different context “*the food that perishes*” (John 6:27). But doing these good things in faith, as a fruit of faith for God’s glory, is laying “*up for [oneself] treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal*”; such is “*the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you*” (John 6:27). As Jesus concludes: “*where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*” May our hearts ever be with Jesus, Priceless Treasure.

Ash Wednesday, therefore, dark and morbid though it may seem, is actually a renewed call for our hearts. “[R]eturn to me with all your heart.” “Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” “[R]end your hearts [in repentance] and not your garments [in

some ostentatious display].” Give me “a broken spirit ... a broken and contrite heart, O God.” “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. ... uphold me with a willing spirit.”

Therefore, O Lord, give us hearts to believe and mouths to confess Jesus Christ as Lord, our Savior from sin, death, and the devil. That’s why that black mark on our foreheads is in the shape of a cross. But whether we go forth from here donning that black cross on our foreheads or not, God grant that we might go forth as lights in a dark world, letting our light shine before men that they may know that our hearts are with God’s only begotten Son, the crucified, and our mouths are filled with the praise of our Savior Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father.

And who knows? Perhaps by this witness, their hearts too will come to treasure Jesus to still more glory to our God and Father. May He grant us a holy Lent.

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