

Ash Wednesday

St. Matthew 6:16-21: "Fasting Prepares Us for Feasting."

February 17, 2021 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

### In Nomine Iesu

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Almighty and everlasting God, You hate nothing that You have made and You forgive the sins of all those who are penitent; create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of You, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*, p. 152)

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*The sermon text for today is taken from the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read as follows in Jesus' name:*

Jesus said: "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. / "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (ESV)

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*These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)*

In Christ Jesus, who "fills the hungry with good things" (Luk. 1:53), dear fellow redeemed:

Some people give up dessert during Lent. Some give up TV. Some give up social media. Roman Catholics are required to give up meat every Friday of Lent. Are you giving up anything? While this can be a useful practice, the Bible does not require it. Some suggest that we should rather add things during Lent—more Bible study, more prayer, and so on. I think these things go together—whenever we give up one thing, we have space to add another. So if you give up time in front of the TV or smartphone, you are adding time that can be spent in other ways, such as Bible reading or prayer.

It's important for us to take an inventory of how we spend our time. Typically we say we don't have enough time to accomplish what we want to. But that isn't a problem of time as much as it is a problem of scheduling or a problem of priority. We can always "make time" for the things that matter most to us. And if we don't "make time" for what we say matters most, then it's fair to ask if it really matters as much as we say.

For example, we all agree that prayer is important. We know that the God of heaven commands us to pray and that He promises to hear us. But how many of us regularly take the time to pray? Prayer takes time—it doesn't have to take a lot of time—but it takes some time or at least some

effort. And there is always so much to do, and our minds are occupied by so much, that prayer gets forgotten and neglected.

In today's text, Jesus calls us away from worldly distractions and toward spiritual discipline. Our text is a portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In the section just before our text, Jesus talks about giving to the needy: *"when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you"* (Mat. 6:3-4). Then He talks about prayer: *"when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you"* (v. 6). And then we have His encouragement to fast, to go without food for a time: *"when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."*

There is a clear pattern here. First of all, Jesus does not command the people to give to the needy, pray, and fast. He just expects that they will: *"when you give," "when you pray," "when you fast."* Second He says that as much as possible, we should hide our giving, our praying, and our fasting. These things are not meant for the eyes of others. They are meant for the eyes of our Heavenly Father, who rewards us according to His grace. That's His third point: *"your Father who sees in secret will reward you."*

Perhaps the most surprising discipline on the list is fasting. You might have heard about how fasting can provide health benefits for adults without certain underlying conditions. I came across an "intermittent fasting" plan recently which suggests eating in an eight hour window each day and then fasting for sixteen hours to give the body time to burn fat.

But Jesus is speaking here about the spiritual benefits of fasting. This wasn't a foreign concept to the people of the Bible. The Israelites often fasted in Old Testament times, and always on the Day of Atonement. In New Testament times, Luke tells us about the widow Anna, who *"did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day"* (Luk. 2:37). John the Baptist and his disciples fasted in preparation for the Messiah's coming (Mar. 2:18).

Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness as He began His public work. The Christians in Antioch fasted when Barnabas and Saul were sent off as missionaries (Act. 13:2-3). And when pastors were appointed in Asia as a result of these mission efforts, we are told that *"with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed"* (Act. 14:23).

So why don't we all have the habit of fasting today? In part, it's because we don't want to demand something that God has not. He did not give a law of fasting in the Ten Commandments. But it may also be that we don't fast because we never have; it is a foreign concept to us.

It hasn't always been a foreign concept among Lutherans. Think of the words of our Catechism which are printed on the front of the bulletin: *"Fasting and bodily preparation are indeed a fine outward training; but he is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words, 'Given and shed for you for the remission of sins'"* (Proper Reception of the Sacrament).

We are right to say that fasting is not required, but that does not mean it is to be rejected. Luther wrote that “Fasting and bodily preparation are indeed a fine outward training.” What makes fasting “a fine outward training”? Fasting prepares us to receive. It uncovers our hunger. It reveals our weaknesses. It exposes the idols of our heart. The purpose of fasting is not to offer it to God as a good work, which is often the way “giving something up for Lent” is understood. Fasting is rather a preparation to receive the good gifts of God.

Jesus promises that *“your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”* God does not reward us because we are so deserving. He always rewards us according to His grace. The humbling of our body through fasting along with the humbling of our spirit in repentance is seen by our merciful Father. He knows who we are. He knows our needs and our struggles and our sorrows. And He knows exactly how to address them.

He sends His Son Jesus to come to our aid. Jesus lived a holy life for us, including perfectly caring for the needy, perfectly praying, and perfectly fasting. And He was forsaken and rejected by the Father and swallowed up by death, so that we would be delivered from God’s eternal wrath and punishment. Jesus brings us these gifts of His righteousness, forgiveness, and life when He comes to us in His Word and Sacraments.

Through these means, Jesus addresses the sin, the weakness, and the hunger that fasting exposes. He does not come to punish us or lecture us. He comes to heal us and comfort us and strengthen us. When Jesus comes, we receive exactly what we need. He never leaves us empty-handed. He fills us with the gifts of His grace, and He gives us a taste of the heavenly treasures that we will enjoy in fullness for all eternity.

We fast now in joyful anticipation of the feast to come.

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.*

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