

Sermon – Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
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Grace Lutheran Church
Ash Wednesday – Year B
14 February 2024

“Honest Ash”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Last summer, a group of hockey parents were standing around the rink, enjoying the sights and sounds of our girls celebrating the start of a new season. We got to talking about who we are and what we do for a living. In our midst there was a lawyer and a law enforcement officer. Someone commented that all we needed was a doctor and we'd be all set for any emergencies that might arise. One of my daughter's teammates overheard and said, "What about Greta's dad? Isn't he a doctor?" We all broke down laughing because, well, yes, *technically*. But unless the patient's emergency involves reinterpreting post-war radical Lutheranism through a lens of Brazilian liberationism such that vocation, not sanctification, becomes the means through which to explore the ethical implications of discipleship when exegeting the Gospel of John for the sake of a proclamation that takes seriously the call to work for justice in this world without thereby undermining the forensic declaration of forgiveness – well, unless that's the emergency at hand, I'm probably not the type of doctor you want on your emergency response team. In fact, I'd bring no professional expertise to bear. I would be, in spite of a title that might confuse people, useless. I may be a doctor, but I'm not *that* kind of doctor, and it wouldn't do anyone any good at all, myself included, for me to pretend otherwise.

2. Of course, since when has that stopped people? From pretending otherwise, that is. This human tendency is at the heart of Jesus' teaching – his critique, really – in today's reading, from the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. Don't be like the hypocrites, Jesus says. Don't be people who pretend to be who you aren't. And who are these hypocrites? Those who give alms after sounding a trumpet, who pray while standing on streetcorners, who fast and make sure to look miserable while doing so. Hypocrites are those who stride onto the stage to play the part of another, whose actions are no more than playacting, in the worst sense of the word. And hypocrites are what we all are, in one way or another.

3. To be clear, the issue is with the acting, not the actions. Not only is there nothing wrong with giving alms, prayer, or fasting, Jesus simply assumes that you will do these things. They are not superhuman feats; neither are they the bare minimum. These actions – giving generously, speaking with God, fasting for the sake of repentance and clarity – are meant to be as natural to us as breathing. Why make a show of it? Why, indeed? To draw attention *to* ourselves, of course. I'm better than them! And to draw attention *away* from ourselves, too – never mind the skeletons in the closet. Just look at me! But not too closely, and not at the real me. It's nothing but a shell game, or three-card monte on the boardwalk. Misdirection, all the way down. Look over there, so that no one sees the truth right here.

4. But the truth of who we are is an ashen thing. We are, Valentine's Day celebrations notwithstanding, a brokenhearted people. We have wandered from God's desires for our lives. We are sinners. We don't need even need to overdo it here; no need to wallow in our depravity or imagine we are chief among sinners. A look in the mirror will suffice. Your life is not what God intended. We have turned inward upon ourselves. God creates, calls us into covenant, but, in the words of Ian McFarland, "the disparity between divine transcendence and human fecklessness" leaves us incapable of being who

- God made us to be. And at the at of who we are is the reality of our mortality. This life, that has gone wrong in so many ways, from the disasters of war and violence and racism to the hidden hurts of our hearts, this life will end in death. To death you shall return.
5. Today is a day for honesty. To look in the mirror and be real. About sin, and about death. And then to hear the truth about who Jesus is, and what Jesus does. St. Paul proclaims that Jesus, the very Son of God who knew no sin, becomes sin for our sake. Jesus, the Word through which life comes into being, enters death for our sake. And we, for his sake, become the righteousness of God. The good news is that you don't have to be something you aren't. No, this isn't because you are enough on your own, but because sin and death are not problems that God cannot overcome. You are a sinner? Yes, and just so are you now forgiven. You were dead in sin? Yes, and for Christ's sake you are alive, and need no longer fear the grave. Jesus is just the physician for the condition we're in.
 6. Today, when you look in the mirror, you see the honest truth of who you are, a sinner who is a beloved child of God. Marked with dust, yes, but dust that is cruciform. You belong to Christ. *Whose* you are is *who* you are. The discipline set before you this Lent is to be who you Christ now calls you to be. We journey once more with him to the cross and find the beginning of new life. So, give, with joyful abundance, not caring who sees it but to meet this world's needs. Pray, speaking with your Father in heaven, not caring who hears but delighting that your Father delights in hearing from you. Fast, turning your back on all that is hurtful or hateful. Treasure these gifts, for it is here that your heart finds rest, and in this way bear witness to the gospel. Walk these forty days, seeing all that Christ has done for you. Yes, sinner, you are dust. To dust you shall return. And from dust shall our God raise you into the joy of life. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.