

Sermon – Matthew 6:1-6, 116-21
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Grace Lutheran Church
Ash Wednesday – Year A
18 February 2026

“Tell the Truth”

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

1. I've encountered many kinds of sports parents over the years. Perhaps you have, too. There are those who always arrived decked out in team clothing and those who bring enough snacks to feed an army. There are those who remain cheerful and encouraging no matter how the team is doing and those who prefer chatting with other parents to watching the game itself. There are always those who give the refs a hard time. But the parents who stand out the most are the ones whose reason for being there seems to be to yell at their own kid. The unrelentingly demanding parents who, for one reason or another, can't seem to remember that they're watching children playing a game. A game that is supposed to be fun. Some years ago at a baseball tournament, I saw this play out every time a child on the other team came up to bat. "Elbow up! Stop pulling your head! Eye on the ball! Follow through! Stop chasing!" These were all, no doubt, salient points of advice. Given quietly and caringly during practice, they might have helped the child improve. But yelled from the bleachers, between every pitch in every at bat? Not so much. At one point, the player, all of nine or ten years old, stepped off the box, turned to the stands with tears running down his face, and yelled, "Dad, you're not helping me!" And then, if I remember correctly, the poor kid struck out. I'm sure he wanted nothing more than to succeed, if only to get his dad off his back. But the weight of it all was just too much. How does one deal with such an assault of demand and criticism?

2. What sort of voice are we hearing today? What words come at us on this Ash Wednesday? From scripture and liturgy, the assault comes on. You are sinners and transgressors. You are mortal, you are dust. It is a day of darkness and gloom. To dust you shall return. Beware of practicing your piety like that. No, do it like this. How will you ever earn your Father's favor in that way? You are dust. It is enough, perhaps, to make us throw our hands up in despair. If we are helpless and hopeless, what's the point? Have we any hope of getting better?

3. If we start with the reality of our mortality and the weight of our sin and try to work our way to God, where will that ever get us? If the voice that we think of as God's voice is always yelling demands, where do we end up? We might, I suppose, come to a place where a disappointed God loves us anyway, but I'm not sure that's the gospel, or at least not much of a gospel. This is not to say that we port round the problems of sin and death and pretend they're not that big a deal. By no means. Instead, we face them head on. On this Ash Wednesday, as we begin the fast of Lent, we hear of a God who doesn't yell at us from the sidelines or wait for us at the finish. We hear of a God, hear *from* a God, who joins us in the midst of it all. The One who brings the very treasures of heaven down to us on this earth. We hear of Jesus, this One who enters into our sin and our suffering, into the very dustiness of our death, to do all that is needful for us. Our repentance is not a desperate plea to placate an angry parent but the faithful response of those who know that Christ is with us in all things. It is faith in the promise of forgiveness enables our confession of sin. It is trust in the promise of resurrection allows us to look death in the face. The truth of what God in Christ does for us lets us see the truth of our lives and that world around us, and to see it all not with despair but with hope. The hope we have in Christ, not in ourselves, compels us to live for those around us, seeking false hope not in demonstrating our own

worthiness but sharing true hope with those around us, all worthy in the eyes of God.

4. Not long ago, a book of correspondence between Miroslav Volf and Christian Wiman was published. The theologian and the poet, friends and colleagues at Yale Divinity School, carry on a conversation about faith and spiritual searching. But the conversation is not one that happens in some sort of pious, intellectual vacuum; it occurs in the stuff of real life, including Wiman's cancer. At the close of one message, Volf writes, "It seems strange writing this email while you are receiving a bone marrow transplant and putting final touches on it while not knowing how the surgery went. But our love for God and God's love for us has everything to do with both our strength and our utter fragility." Friends, on this day we name our fragility. We are dust and to dust we shall return. But God loves us in our fragility. Joins us in our brokenness. Dies that we might live. Pours out the treasures of heaven that we might know them even now. Breathes new life into our frames and gives us new hearts once more. We do not mar our faces with ashes today to show others how pious we are. We are marked with cruciform ash so that we might find one another, fellow travelers, never alone. Yes, journeying from dust to dust, but not only that. Dust is no longer the last word, and so the first word is always one of hope.
5. People of God, as Lent begins, we tell the truth. We can't do it on our own. We are sinners in need of forgiveness. Sufferers in need of restoration. Mortals in need of resurrection. We tell the truth but we can bear it, for we hear also the truth of the gospel. As St. Paul tells us, in spite of all we endure, now is the day of our salvation. Return to the Lord your God and discover that you never managed to get that far away. Jesus doesn't stay on the sidelines. As we make our way to Easter and to the coming dawn of a new creation, Jesus journeys with you. Sin and suffering and the dust of death linger but they will not last. But Jesus, the Word of God, endures forever. And in him, you will, too. Amen.

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