

Ash Wednesday
Matthew 6:1-18

Here's my Ash Wednesday Luther quote as I promised last year because it's so good:

"The summons of death comes to us all, and no one can die for another. Everyone must fight his own battle with death by himself, alone. We can shout into another's ears, but everyone must himself be prepared for the time of death, for I will not be with you then, nor you with me. Therefore everyone must himself know and be armed with the chief things which concern a Christian."¹

We die alone. Whether you die in an empty room or surrounded by your loved ones, you die alone. No one dies in your place.

You are a sinner. Death shows that you are a sinner. You will pass through death into judgment. (Heb 9:27) Judgment before a holy and righteous Judge.

If this is all we heard tonight, it would be a worthy meditation to meditate upon for days.

One misconception that may arise from the fact that we die alone is that we think we're alone in this life. Or to put it another way, we may fall for the misperception that we are independent beings who don't need anyone else. That is especially easy to fall for today because we live in a country that values independence above everything else. But God didn't create you this way. After all, you have a belly button. God raised Adam from the dust and God took Eve out of Adam's rib. But everyone else, including you and me, have a mother and father. Even if fathers and mothers abandon their children, it doesn't change the fact that they are fathers and mothers.

¹ Eight Sermons at Wittenberg, "Invocabit" sermons, AE, pg70

It is sad, to be sure, because it hurts children, but it doesn't change the facts of fatherhood and motherhood. We are all born into families and are meant to create our own families. You are born dependent upon someone else. You are meant to stay this way.

Families come together to form a church. The families in the church are dependent upon each other to call a pastor so that they may be served by God's pure Word and efficacious Sacraments. As families grow, the church grows. The early church in Acts had a lot of adult converts. We may be in that sort of time again, but historically, the church grows as families grow. When fathers and mothers raise children that don't care about the church, the church dies in that area. You and I know that the church will never die because her Lord Jesus won't let His church die. But it may die in many places in the United States. As families die, metaphorically speaking, the church dies in that area.

Consider this. In the last 50 years, people living with their spouse has fallen a mind-blowing 30%² which means there are 30% fewer traditional families. Church membership has fallen a mind-blowing 20% in that same timeframe³ even though we would count it higher if we actually looked at people who go to church regularly. Correlation does not prove causation, but that is an incredible correlation. I believe it's safe to say that as families die, churches die in the same area.

In families, we learn how to relate to other people and we learn the fact that no man is an island. It's no surprise that many sources are reporting a pandemic of loneliness at a time that the family has been most fractured. Feminism has sold the lie of female independence and has done its part to fracture the family. No fault divorce, birth control, and the sexual revolution has sold the lie that sex is separate from marriage and done its part to fracture the family.

² https://www.pennlive.com/news/erry-2018/06/3dd6bfa9da3775/heres_how_the_american_family.html

³ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/248837/church-membership-down-sharply-past-two-decades.aspx>

Government programs standing in for the husband and rewarding single motherhood has sold the lie of “burogomy” and done its part to fracture the family. The LGBTQ agenda has sold the lie that family is something different than God set up and done its part to fracture the family. I think anyone who’s reasonable can see that the family is fractured. It’s really no surprise that the church struggles to fill its pews anymore.

When I was younger, it seemed to me that the “world” saw the church as filled with a bunch of hypocrites and that was a convenient excuse not to go to church. I’m really not sure how the world sees the church anymore. I fear that it sees it as totally irrelevant and not worthy of anyone’s time. I’m not sure how to attack outright apathy.

But I do know the only weapon we have is the Word of God. We cannot force anyone to become a Christian. They must be persuaded by the Word of God. This implies that you must actually know the Word of God, naturally. But rhetoric is also involved here.

Rhetoric is the art of persuasion. Sadly, politics has given rhetoric a bad name, but classically there was substance to the art of rhetoric. It consists of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*. *Logos* is the content and structure of what you say. It is the Word of God artfully presented to another person. *Ethos* is the credibility or trust that you engender in another person. If someone thinks you’re a standup guy or gal, they’re more likely to listen to what you have to say. *Pathos* is the emotion and value connection you make in what you say. Is what you say critical for life or is it just trivial information?

Here’s another way to describe these three components of rhetoric. *Logos*: does what you say about God fit into reality? *Ethos*: do you live as if you believed what you just said? *Pathos*: does what you say apply to my life in a meaningful way? If these are true to a high degree, you have a much better chance of convincing someone that what you say is important and it will impact their lives dramatically.

We know that the Holy Spirit works faith when and where He wills, but that does not excuse us from practicing good rhetoric.

Today, Jesus talks about the practices, or *ethos*, of the Christian. He says:

“When you give to the needy... when you pray... and when you fast...”

He doesn't say “if” but “when.” It's no surprise that Jesus immediately connects almsgiving, praying, and fasting to the encouragement to “lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven.” (v. 20) Almsgiving, praying, and fasting do not necessarily get you any treasure in heaven, but it does show you where your heart is.

Imagine if someone were to observe you without your knowledge for thirty days. I know that sounds really creepy and if someone actually did it, they should go to jail. But what would someone say about you if they could observe your life for thirty days? Would they know you're a Christian? Would they believe you cared for the needy? Would they believe you cared about God? Would they believe you cared about your physical body which is a gift from the Lord?

Jesus tells us not to practice these things for public consumption. They bring their own reward! And not from God the Father! But we are to practice these things often and regularly. I suppose I ought to define them.

Almsgiving means giving to the needy. It does not necessarily mean giving money to the homeless. It may mean giving the homeless a meal or piece of clothing. It may mean giving to an organization that provides for the poor whether the organization is a church or a civic institution. It may mean opening up your house to the needy. It certainly means inconveniencing yourself and it certainly means you cannot ignore the poor.

Prayer means talking to God. It ranges from formal prayers like the “Our Father” that Jesus taught us to *ex corde* or, from the heart, prayers.

It means talking to God often. If you just follow the Small Catechism form of prayer daily, you'll say the Lord's Prayer at least four to five times a day: when you rise, when you eat two to three times a day, and when you go to bed.

Fasting means, technically, abstinence from food. You fast every night when you sleep. Fasting in the Christian sense, means abstinence from food that you would normally eat. So skipping a meal you would normally eat is fasting. It is usually associated with repentance. When you're sick, you usually don't eat. When you realize your sickness from sin, you should probably think about not eating and seeking private confession and absolution. The fact that we talk about fasting from sugar or from electronics should tell us something about the sad state we're in in the modern world. But I'll leave that for another day.

These three practices Jesus commands are practiced by Jesus Himself, as you'd expect. He gives to the needy by feeding the 4,000 and 5,000. He fasts when talking with the Samaritan women. He frequently goes off by Himself to pray even to the point of forgoing food and sleep during His prayer time. This shows His humanity that He shares with us. Remember, O Man, that you are dust and to dust you shall return.

These practices of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting remind us that we are dust. In other words, you can't take anything with you to heaven but you can prepare yourself to go there. Maybe we're limited in what we can do. The very young, sick, and elderly may not be able to fast. That's okay. Parents with young children may not be able to devote a ton of time to prayer. That's okay. Families just starting out or those on a fixed income may not be able to give much to the needy. That's okay. What's not okay is ignoring almsgiving, prayer, and fasting altogether.

Now I said that you cannot take anything with you to heaven. That's not the whole truth. The one thing you can take with you to heaven is your family by passing on the Faith to them.

If moms take their faith seriously, there's a decent chance her kids will as well. If dads take their faith seriously, there's a better chance his kids will as well. Sorry moms, but that shows God's order of creation. But if moms and dads both take their faith seriously, there's the best chance that their kids will as well. If you have failed in this, repent and commend your kids to your Father in heaven with prayer.

I also said these practices of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting prepare you to go to heaven. That's not the entire truth as well. Jesus gets you to heaven through faith in Him. There's no work we can do that gets us into heaven. However, once you're baptized, you're a child of paradise (LSB 594 God's Own Child, I Gladly Say It). The practices of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting show that you believe that you're a child of paradise *now*. I'm convinced that if you practice these habits regularly, you will have an *ethos* and maybe even a *pathos* that's convincing to other people.

This Lent we're going to look at these spiritual practices.

First, we're going to look at what a Christian *habitus* is. In other words, what does a Christian life look like? If I can see your *habitus*, or daily habits, I can tell you what you actually believe. And not what you say you believe.

Second, we're going to look at praying the Psalms. The Psalms are a wonderful gift of God and allow us to pray, yet at the same time, they train our emotions. One of the biggest obstacles we face today in politics or daily life, it seems to me, is untrained emotions. The Psalms train our emotions while letting us express our emotions at the same time!

Third, we're going to look at praying the Small Catechism. The Lutheran Small Catechism is the only Christian Catechism you can actually pray. It's drawn from God's Word directly and trains your mind. As Luther says in his preface to the Large Catechism: "There are many benefits and fruits to be gained, if [the catechism] is daily read and practiced in thought and speech. For example, the Holy Spirit is present in such reading, repetition,

and meditation. He bestows ever new and more light and devoutness... Besides, catechism study is a most effective help against the devil, the world, the flesh, and all evil thoughts." (LC Preface.9-10)

Fourth, we're going to look at fasting. Do we really understand that men and women do not live by bread alone? How many things are we enslaved too, and even to the point of not knowing we're enslaved. Paul says "I will not be dominated by *anything*." (1 Corinthians 6:12) Fasting has a way of showing us our enslavements. Plus, times of fasting are good for our physical and spiritual body. Most modern ailments are related to poor diet in both quantity and quality.

Fifth, we're going to look at almsgiving. You don't actually own anything. You came into the world with nothing and you will leave the world with nothing. God actually tests you by giving you children and also all sorts of material things. Jesus says, "One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you true riches?" (Luke 16:10-11)

Through these habits of the Christian, we will learn more about living in Christ. You have died with Christ in your baptism. You will face the summons of death as described at the start of the sermon. But the Paraclete, Jesus, will be beside you as your heavenly lawyer and plead your case so your Father proclaims that you are righteous in His sight. You are already righteous in God's sight. We'll explore what it means to live as if you believed you're righteous right now.

May God bless our Lenten devotions.

In Jesus' name. Amen.