

10 February 2016
Ash Wednesday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Turning to the Gifts”

Text: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21; Joel 2:12-19; 2 Cor. 5:20b-6:10

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

I realize that was not a usual Ash Wednesday hymn (LSB #602)! Not a usual hymn for a day when the paraments are black, the atmosphere is solemn, and the focus is on repentance. Not a usual hymn for a day when ashes are ground into our foreheads with the words: *Dust you are, and to dust you shall return*. To sing of gifts . . . it doesn't quite seem to fit.

And yet, I submit to you for your consideration this night, that is exactly what this day is all about. For we have come here not only to begin this season of Lent by repenting of our sin, but to then receive *the gifts Christ freely gives*. His Absolution, His Word, and His Supper, wherein He gives His forgiveness, His life, and His salvation. We are here tonight to receive these gifts we need.

And we do because they are the gifts we have refused; turned away from. For that's what sin really is: a turning away from God and His gifts, to a self-reliance on me and what I can get or do for myself. Repentance, then, is turning away from myself, my self-absorption, my self-centeredness, my wants and desires and what I think is best, and receiving our Father's gifts again. For then we are in the right place. God gives and we receive; and thus receiving, we live in the image of God by giving to others.

So it was in the beginning. God made everything. He created a perfect world for His children - the man and woman He would create to live in it in His image. But they turned away from His gifts - His gifts of life, of good and abundant food, of each other in marriage, of being in His image, of relationship with Him - they turned away from all that to the allure of getting something for themselves. And the result of turning away from God and His gifts was death. *Dust you are and to dust you shall return*.

God's answer to them, His response to their turning away, was twofold. First, He gave again. He gave them the promise of a Saviour. But secondly came the Law. For the Law comes when the gifts are refused. The Law which is now needed to protect the gifts of God from us who turned from receivers into takers. And also to show us our sin, that we turn away from ourselves and back to the gifts; turn away from taking and go back to receiving.

So consider the Holy Gospel that we heard tonight. Consider how it speaks of taking the gifts of God and turning them into something they were never intended to be.

Righteousness is a gift of God. Prayer is a gift of God. Helping others is living in the gift of His giving image. And yet what happened? The Pharisees took these gifts and use them as opportunities for themselves - to be seen, to be praised, to get the admiration of others. Repentance was needed.

It had happened in Joel's day as well. God had brought the children of Israel out of Egypt and given them a land and a place for their own - *all gift*. And they turned away from Him. They believed in themselves, not Him. They began to worship the Baals, not the true God. They made much of themselves and little of God. Repentance was needed.

Return, turn back to me and my gifts again, God called out through Joel.

So what about us today? Do we fall into the same trap? Do we turn away from the gifts of God to something else? We want to say no; that's not us. But the truth? We do.

We turn away from God's gift of Absolution when instead of repenting and confessing, we try to justify ourselves, or explain and excuse our actions, or blame others for our sin.

We turn away from the gift of God's Word when we believe what the world says and thinks and not what God has said is true; when we judge things by what seems to me rather than on what God has said.

We turn away from the gift of Baptism when our identity is no longer child of God, born again, born from above, by water and the Word, but instead is what I do, how much I make, how busy and important I am; and measuring our value by those parameters instead of my value coming from my Saviour.

We turn away from the gift of our Lord's Body and Blood when instead of living as the Body of Christ that the Body of Christ makes us - the communion of saints! - Church instead becomes not who we are in Christ, but what we do for one or two hours on a Sunday morning. When the people who gather with us here are no more to us than the neighbor down the street, or the co-worker in the next cubicle, or the student in the desk across the room.

And what of the other gifts our Lord has given? How have we used the gift of life He has given? The gift of family? The gift of prayer? The gift of our callings and work? And so many other gifts too numerous to list here. Have we turned away from these gifts? Or selfishly used them for me? Taking, not receiving. Taking, not giving.

So tonight the cry goes out once again: ***Be reconciled to God.*** Repent and turn back to receive His gifts again. Receive Christ again, the one who ***for our sake He made sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.***

Christ made sin for you. Christ made your sin, your turning away. And so when He cried out from the cross: *My God, My God, why have You forsaken me? . . .* Why have you *turned away* from me? . . . that's the turning away we have done; that's our situation in turning away from God, though we're too dumb to know it. That's what such turning away gets you; what it got Jesus in our place. Death. *Dust you are, and to dust you shall return.*

Except something extraordinary happened after Jesus was forsaken in our place and died - He did not turn to dust. He rose to life again. Just as the Spirit turned Adam from a lifeless lump of earth to a living being, so the lifeless body of the Second Adam was spirited to life, rose to life, from the dust of death, too. Never to die again.

Which means that the forsakenness is over. There is none left for you. Though we turn away from God, He will never turn away from you. Satan wants you to think God has forsaken you, that the struggles you are going through are signs that He has forgotten you, or turned away from you, or will no longer help. But it is not so. Consider all the struggles of the apostles listed by Paul in the Epistle we heard: beatings, hunger, imprisonment, and much more. Yet Paul said this too - that they are: ***sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, yet possessing everything.*** That is what it means to have the gifts of God in the midst of a world of sin and death. Our trouble and weakness and sorrow and death do not win, but are conquered by the gifts and strength of our Saviour.

Ash Wednesday and Lent, then, is not a time for us to buckle down, buck up, and conquer our sin. We can't. You've tried. I've tried. We can't. It's too strong and we're too weak.

But these 40 days of Lent plus 6 Sundays in Lent is the time when we focus again on the One who did. That Jesus conquered the sin that we cannot in His death and resurrection, and conquers it in us now by applying to us the forgiveness and fruits of His cross through His gifts. So this is the time for us to turn - to turn back to the sin-conquering gifts of Jesus. To receive again from Him all that He has for us. That as we live in this world of sorrows and struggles, of pain and fear, of worry and uncertainty, of sin and death, we have hope . . . and the promise that we are not forsaken, not alone. The Son of God came to us; He came to us with life. He came to give us hope.

Tonight . . . *starting* tonight . . . turn back. Turn back to the gifts, back to Christ. Receive the love, the forgiveness, the life, the hope, the strength, the comfort, the promises, and the joy you need. Receive Him. For He is here. With them. For you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.