

18 February 2026
Ash Wednesday

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Singular Life in Christ”

Text: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

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

God is the Author and Giver of life. He created all things in the beginning, and ever since. There is nothing that is that did not come from His hand. It is all gift from Him. All life is a gift from Him.

And that life we live in two different ways. Perhaps you could even say two different arenas. In theology, we call them *coram deo* and *coram hominibus* - before God and before man.

Now ideally, and the way God created us to be, they would be one and the same. No distinction, no difference. Our lives would be a singular whole. We would live the same before God and before man.

But in reality, we must admit, we must *confess*, there is a difference. Sin has rent asunder what God had joined together. Created for a singular, unified life, sin has instead shredded us and destined us for death.

And one of the results of that is that we now do things (as we heard Jesus warn against tonight) *in order* to be seen by men, and be praised by men. Sometimes those things we do are sinful, so that we fit in, so we'll be one of the guys, or one of the gals. Sometimes they aren't sinful, but we do those good things in sinful ways, for the wrong reasons, ***practicing our righteousness before men*** in order to be praised by them, so they will think well of me; think me good and holy and pious.

So we wind up with this kind of double life: wanting to fit in with the world and all its works and all its ways and be praised by those in the world . . . AND wanting to follow the Lord and all *His* works and all *His* ways and seeking praise for that. And therefore often acting one way before those who are worldly and a different way before those in the church. And maybe even with this bizarre result: that what we boast of before men we wind up confessing before God, and what we do for God we apologize for to men.

This is not good. Such *spiritual schizophrenia* is not good. No wonder the apostle Paul once cried out, after lamenting this very battle raging inside him: *Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death* (Romans 7:24)?

And so I think we must ask ourselves this question: *Why? Why do we do it? Why do we care so much? Why do I care so much what other people think of me? Perhaps even more than I worry about what God thinks of me!* And I think the answer is this: because *that's where I find my life* - my value, my worth, my self-esteem. From the world, and from my life in the world, and the people in the world. From their affirmation, praise, and admiration. I care, because I'm trying to not only save face - **I'm trying to save my life.**

But it doesn't work. Not really. Because the attitudes and appetites of the world are constantly shifting. What's in one day is out the next, and what's praised one day is criticized the next. Perhaps it was this very thing that Jesus was thinking about when He said: *whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it* (Luke 9:24)? He knew that trying to save your life is a losing battle. A battle we will all, sooner or later, lose. That mark on your forehead tonight signifies that. Or just go to any cemetery and ask the people there. *Dust you are, and to dust you will return.*

So today, Ash Wednesday, we recognize this, we confess this, this sinful, mixed-up person I am. Looking for life, striving for life, a life that is full and meaningful, a life of value and purpose, a life that will not end . . . and getting it wrong. Sinning not only when I do - or fail to do - this or that, but far worse: **making myself the lord and saviour of my own life.** And in so doing, losing the life I'm trying so hard to save.

But someone has already done that for you! That's the good news for you tonight. You don't have to save your life - Jesus already did. As we heard tonight, He took your sin; **He became sin for you.** On the cross, the Father *laid on Him the iniquity of us all* (Isaiah 53:6), **so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.** So that in Him, we be made right again. That in Him, we have life again. A whole, singular, righteous life, restored to be as we were created to be.

And that life you are looking for, striving for, *is here for you*, for the Author and Giver of Life is here, giving life. He raised you from spiritual death in Holy Baptism. He revives your struggling soul with His Absolution. He nourishes and strengthens you with His Body and Blood. It's all here for you. So that you need not search and strive - just receive. You can stop the exhausting and impossible struggle to save your own life, and *receive* - by grace - that life you need and that will not end. A life in His love. Accepted by Him. It's why Jesus came. It's why Jesus comes. And it's why He's

coming again.

As David once said (and he would know!): *Blessèd is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered* (Psalm 32:1).

Blessed to live a blessed, *singular* life. For it's hard living a double life, a divided life. Trying to please everyone. Showing one life to some people, another life to other people, and not only trying to keep it all straight, but trying to remember who we really are! And sadly, many forget. And wander from their heavenly Father. Living no longer as *His* children, but as children of the world. Maybe you've done that even a time or two.

So Ash Wednesday calls us back. Not just to repentance, but to life. To *receive* life. To remember who we are, and whose we are, where life comes from, and to receive the forgiveness and life we need and crave. **Jesus doesn't leave us in our ashes.** He joined us in our ashes and death! He joined us in the world's hatred and scorn. He joined us in the pit of death and the grave. And risen from the dead, He now lives to raise us, too. To save and forgive and feed.

And then with Jesus and His life in us, we can then ***practice our righteousness*** - as Jesus said tonight, our giving to the needy, our prayer, our fasting - for the *right* reason - not to be praised by men and find our life and value and worth there, but so that *they will see our good deeds and praise* - not me! - but **our Father who is in heaven** (Matthew 5:16). That they see Him and His life is us. The one who has life for all. And receive that life, too.

And in this way, live that singular life we were created to live. That whether we are in the church or in the world, we live the same. That whether men praise us or revile us, we live the same. We live as the dearly loved children of God we are. Always *coram deo* and *coram hominibus* - knowing that whether anyone else ever knows or sees what we do, our Father in heaven sees all. And He will bless. He will bless with His forgiveness and love, and a life that cannot end. The life we've been looking for.

So come now and receive that blessing and life, and go give that blessing to others, ***practicing your righteousness*** not for yourself, but in faith toward God and love toward your neighbor. Set free from the searching and striving. Set free from the tyranny of the world's opinion. Set free from guilt and shame. Set free to live as the forgiven, righteous, singular child of God you are - once again! - in Jesus.

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