

Sermon for: Trinity Lutheran Church, Manilla

Ash Wednesday—February 14, 2024

Sermon Title/Theme: “Guided to FORGIVENESS”

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

It is typical to call the 40 day season of Lent a journey. Because that is what it is! We are journeying with our Lord as He goes to the cross.

I am privileged to be your tour guide on this trek to the tree where Jesus died. What do we see on this night as the journey begins?

On this Ash Wednesday, the first thing we can't help but see is ashes—ashes placed on our foreheads in the shape of a cross to remind us that we are dust and to dust we shall return.

Why ashes? Because since ancient times, people wore sackcloth and ashes when they were sorrowful, repentant and grieving, all of which we do this night as we ponder the depth of our sins and the turning away we have done—turning away from God to do our own thing, to follow evil or destructive or prideful paths. We mourn with St. Paul that the things we don't want to do end up being the exact things we end up doing. Woe to us!

The symbol of ash and dust also points us back to Adam, the first man, whom God created from the dust of the earth and breathed life into him. Adam and Eve's disobedience of God brought God's judgment: “You shall return to the ground for out of it you were taken for you are dust and to dust you shall return,” (Genesis 3:19). The judgment comes to all sinners for “the wages of sin is death.” We are human; we are finite; we are of the earth and will go back to the earth. It is a fact of life that has no detour.

The ashes are placed on our forehead in the sign of the cross. The sign of the cross points us in a new and hopeful direction. Yes, we are sinners; yes, we will die. But the cross of Christ brings a new perspective to our very being. The cross guides us to a fresh start that puts sin behind us and makes death only a stepping stone to everlasting life.

How does this happen? Through forgiveness! Forgiveness is the bedrock upon which we build our faith in Christ. Forgiveness is the number one calling card of the cross. We go to the cross in Lent again and again to confess our sins and there receive forgiveness.

How can we be assured of that forgiveness? Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. His sacrifice made complete payment for all the sins of all people. Christ's sacrifice has made payment for all of your sins and mine. Forgiveness flows from the cross in the blood of Jesus. Forgiveness flows from the cross through the sacrament shared this evening. Jesus gives His body and His blood for the forgiveness of your sins.

Jesus spoke from the cross seven times. He spoke forgiveness from the cross. The first words that Jesus speaks as He hangs on the cross are, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," (Luke 23:34). In our human nature we act angrily and revengefully to those who hurt us. Jesus, in His divine compassion, removed the punishment they deserved by letting their sins go in that moment.

Of the Jewish leaders who condemned Jesus to death and stood beneath his cross satisfied with the literal execution of their plan; of the Roman soldiers who nailed His body on the cross, of those who stood by jeering, Jesus said, "they know not what they do." We confess that often we do not know what we are doing either. We try to justify our actions. We try to minimize our

sins by claiming the sins of others are worse. We assume our hurtful words are not heard, our demeaning phone texts or our inappropriate computer screens are not seen. We try to hide behind cultural trends. We fail to be loving and caring. What is Jesus' response to our sins of commission and omission? "Father forgive them. Forgive them because I have gone to the cross for them. Forgive them all of all sins for all time."

As fully forgiven people, we respond by living lives of forgiveness. Our lives should be steered by the guiding principle of forgiveness for all, no matter what they have done. Again, that is not how the world normally operates. There is a lot of emphasis on revenge and vengeance for wrongdoing. Our human nature tells us that people have to pay for the bad things they have done—"an eye for an eye." And we as Christians often agree.

There is no getting around the fact that someone has to pay for the evils we have done. But what the cross announces to us is that Jesus is the one who pays the price for every sin committed. We are no longer subject to the wrath of God for our sins, and therefore, no one should be subject to our wrath when people come to us confessing their sins. Because of Christ and the cross, the sin is no more, so our desire to "get even" should be no more. Through the Christ of the cross, the response is "I forgive you."

Forgiveness is hard. It is hard especially when we encounter sinful behavior again and again and again. It was also hard for the disciples to comprehend. Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, how often will be brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" That seemed like a generous response to Peter. Jesus responds, "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

(Some translations say, "70 x 7,") Jesus' point is that there is no limit to the number of time you forgive someone because there is no limit to the times Jesus forgives us

Because of the cross, we know for certain that forgiveness is not some passing fancy or something we just do now and then and only to those we love. No, forgiveness from the cross is forever. It is something that is already accomplished. It is something that can never be taken away from us.

Sheila was reflecting on her divorce decades ago, on her strained relationship with her son, and on her frequent jealousy of a friend. Sheila stated, "I need to work on forgiveness."

No matter of our life stage, history of relationships, spiritual maturity, or any other considerations, each of us can also say, "I need to work on forgiveness." In the contexts of our lives, forgiveness is a journey. We pray again and again in the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer, "And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Guided to the cross this Lenten season, we see again that Jesus did all the work for our forgiveness. Jesus' prayer, "Father, forgive them," has been heard and answered through His sacrifice on the cross.

Guided to the cross on this Lenten journey, we become Christ-like in forgiving others.

Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding guide your life and bring you to life everlasting. Amen