

The Festival of Ash Wednesday (Observed)
1 March 2009
Concordia Lutheran Mission
Terrebonne, Oregon

“God Acts Quickly to Restore through Absolution Hearts Broken by Sin.”

“And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he *is* gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.”

Joel 2:13.

Introduction.

How long does it take God to forgive? God forgives quickly, as we see from today’s text, and also from the fact that He has already forgiven us all sins in the Cross of Christ.

God is the most maligned Person ever. Popularly, He is viewed as a tyrannical curmudgeon who tortures people endlessly and then only, perhaps, maybe, He forgives.

But such is not the case, as we see with the text today. After calling on the people to rend their hearts, not their garments, i.e. truly to repent, God announces straightaway He has forgiven already. God only preaches repentance long enough to bring us to the conviction of our sin. At the point of conviction, God quickly absolves us, gives us peace, and saves us.

God, then, stands at the ready to forgive immediately through the Gospel hearts broken by sin. Through this absolution born of the Cross of Christ and great Price to our God, He gives peace, the life everlasting, and the resurrection of the body.

I. Man’s Sin is a Grave and Lethal Matter of the Heart.

A. Lent has been misrepresented as appeasing God through overwrought contrition.

This week, with the Festival of Ash Wednesday, we are entering the season of Lent.

Lent is a season of repentance and one, unlike Christmas, not anticipated with joy by the bulk of people. *Mardis Gras* and *Fat Tuesday* are ample testimony to that fact.

Lent, however, has been misrepresented under the papacy as a season to appease God's wrath through our overwrought contrition over our sins. The Rev. Dr. Luther Reed writes of this misrepresentation:

The medieval observance of Lent with its rigors and efforts at appeasement was a tragic relapse from the joy of the early Christians in completed redemption to the fear and uncertainty of pre-Christian thought. Much of this is felt in the propers of the Sundays. Some of these seem to have been chosen in line with the medieval conception of fasting, penitence, and good works in the spirit of works righteousness and the hope of acquiring "merit" before God.¹

Lent, on the other hand, is actually supposed to be a period of refreshment and strengthening of faith. The Rev. Dr. James Brauer writes in *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*:

Weekday services in Lent should focus on the deepening of faith, refreshment for the spirit and on the striving for the obedience of discipleship.²

And the papists are not the only people who've obscured the Gospel through contrition and works of piety in order to reconcile God. Errant Lutherans too have done it. In *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, the Rev. Dr. Fred Precht writes of some of these errant Lutherans, who called themselves "pietists":

The pietistic³ striving for personal consciousness of regeneration lead to *undervaluing the means of grace, namely, the Word of God and the sacraments, the very core of corporate⁴ worship*. Moreover, little importance was attached to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. ... Preaching stressed the personal, revivalistic, admonitory elements in preference to sound doctrine. Stories of exemplary living and dying, the devotion of twice-born people played a prominent role. ... Moreover, the thoroughly regenerated, Pietists thought, did not need such crutches as the formal liturgy, the observance of the church year and Christian customs. Formal prayers gave way to extempore utterances by ministers as well as laity. Hymns based on the objective facts of God's

¹*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 491.

²*Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, ed. the Rev. Dr. Fred Precht, p. 167.

³"About 1700, Pietism, stressing the personal religious experience, set in as a reaction against the prevailing intellectual and philosophic training at the universities." *Concordia Cyclopedia*, p. 221, s.v. "**Education of Ministers**"

⁴Perhaps a better expression would be *public* worship.

redemptive love in Jesus Christ were discarded for hymns of human experience. The subjective and emotional held sway in corporate worship.⁵

Likewise, these same errors were advanced by other church bodies. The Rev. Dr. C. F. W. Walther, one of the founding fathers of the Missouri Synod, writes:

Luther's remarks about the basis on which the Papacy is built up might be amplified by including the sects; for they all, without exception, teach that forgiveness of sins must be obtained by praying, struggling, and wrestling with God until one feels the soothing sensation that grace has been infused into him. However, that is a sheer delusion; for grace cannot be infused into men, since it is the disposition of God outside of ourselves, in heaven. It can only be proclaimed to us. True rest, therefore, can be given us only through the Word, either when we hear it preached or when we read it. From every chapter of the Bible we can get absolution; for there is not a chapter but tells us that our sins have been forgiven. Every little passage which states that God will be merciful is an absolution. That is why Luther says that an evangelical minister cannot open his mouth without pronouncing absolution.⁶

⁵*Lutheran Worship: History and Practice, Authorized by The Commission on Worship of the Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, no date, p. 80, emphasis added.

⁶*The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, p. 177. Here Walther echoes not only Luther, but also *The Apology*: "Moreover, the power of the keys administers and presents the Gospel through absolution, which [proclaims peace to me and] is the true voice of the Gospel {German: The Word of Absolution speaks peace to me and is the Gospel itself}." Article XII [V].³⁹

Luther writes: "For we see the same thing in Zwingli, the Enthusiasts, and all the fantastic spirits, how they err and fail to understand in what way forgiveness of sins comes about. Similarly, the pope and all his doctors of theology fail to understand what absolution is, for all of popedom rests on this article: Grace is infused into people in a mystical way, and whoever wants to have it must be sorry, be contrite, and make satisfaction.

16. But if you ask, What do absolution and the keys accomplish? Then they answer that it is an external power belonging to the church. So, the forgiveness of sins is not grounded upon the Word and faith, where it ought to be, but upon contrition, confession, and making satisfaction.

17. The Anabaptists say the same thing: What can baptism do for the forgiveness of sins? A handful of water cannot wash the soul, stated Nicolaus Storck. Thomas Muentzer argued similarly, How can water cleanse the soul? The Spirit must do it. The pope and his monks, likewise, fail to see what power has been given to mankind to forgive sins.

The common ground, then, from which has sprouted the false teaching of the season of Lent as a season of overwrought contrition to appease God is our sinful and fallen human nature and is not a natural feature of Lent nor of God's approach to fallen man.

B. Lent reminds us that sin is a lethal condition of the heart.

Sin, however, is not soft-peddled and underestimated because of the right understanding of Lent and God's mercy.

Ash Wednesday, for example, reminds us of the severe consequences of sin. The ashes remind us of the ashes to ashes and dust to dust of sin. Moses writes of God's sentence on man after the fall into sin:

... till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return.⁷

Again, Moses writes:

18. Also, the Enthusiasts and Sacramentarians chime in, The Sacrament gives only bread and wine; therefore, one cannot find forgiveness of sin there; the Spirit must give it, the flesh profits nothing. In short, no fantastic spirit, no papist or monk, is able to discern this, that the power to forgive sins is a power God has given to mankind, as stated in this Gospel lesson.

19. You must learn, therefore, to speak of the matter in this way: I know very well and acknowledge that God alone forgives sins. But I must also know and discern the manner, or the means, by which I can be sure that my sins are forgiven. The Scriptures teach every one of us Christians as follows: If I am to have forgiveness of sins, I must not sit in some corner and say, My God, forgive me my sin, and then, as it were, wait for an angel from heaven to come, to say to me, Your sins are forgiven; but God has deigned to draw near to me by ordaining holy baptism and his Word, that I should be baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and he attached his promise along with his command, saying, 'Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved.'" **Nineteenth Sunday After Trinity (1533), *Sermons of Martin Luther, The House Postils*, Vol. 3 *Sermons on Gospel Texts for the Fifteenth through Twenty-Sixth Sundays after Trinity, the Festival of Christ's Nativity, and Other Occasions*, trs. Eugene F.A. Klug, Erwin W. Koehlinger, James Lanning, Everette W. Meier, Dorothy Schocknect, and Allen Schuldheiss, ed. Eugene F.A. Klug, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, pp. 83, 84.**

⁷Genesis 3:19.

And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which *am but* dust and ashes⁸

The Rev. Dr. James Brauer writes in *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*:

Other customs may be used, particularly the imposition of ashes on those who wish it. This ancient act is a gesture of repentance and a powerful reminder about the meaning of the day. Ashes can symbolize dust-to-dustness and remind worshipers of the need for cleansing, scrubbing and purifying.⁹

And the sin which reduces us to dust and eternal damnation is a matter of the heart. Hence, the Lord says in today's Old Testament reading:

Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye *even* to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: And rend your heart, and not your garments....¹⁰

Our sin that leads to our destruction is not only our outward conduct, but also, our inward conduct, our thoughts and feelings in addition to our words and deeds.¹¹ Jesus, therefore, says:

But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man, For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: These are *the things* which defile a man....¹²

What Jesus here teaches is not new. Jesus teaches us that we are accountable for our inward thoughts and passions. But, again, this teaching is not a new concept. Rather, Moses teaches it in the commandments when he writes:

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house.¹³

⁸**Genesis 18:27.**

⁹p. 166.

¹⁰**Joel 2:12, 13.**

¹¹Hence, we confess not only our outward misconduct but that we are “guilty in *thought*, word, and deed ... “ *The Lutheran Hymnal*, p.

¹²**St. Matthew 15:18-19, 20.**

¹³*The Small Catechism, The First Chief Part: The Ten Commandments*, p. 7.

Coveting is not an outward act but an inward act, an act of the heart. In catechism we learned:

72. What does God require of us in the Ninth Commandment? ... God requires that our hearts be filled with *holy desires only*. ... Ye shall *be holy*; for I, the Lord, your God, am holy. *Lev. 19:2*.

St. Paul writes:

... I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet.¹⁴

Consequently, our own thoughts, feelings, and passions condemn us eternally. St. Paul writes:

For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, Cursed *is* every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.¹⁵

Our sinful hearts, then, are lethal, rendering us dead in trespass and sin and consigned to eternal damnation.

II. God is Quick to Forgive and to Save through the Gospel of Christ-Crucified.

A. Christ atoned for all our sins, including the sins of our hearts.

But who can possibly escape this condition? For everyone knows that we all have sinful thoughts and passions that we simply cannot prevent from arising. What, then, are we to do?

It is to this point that the Lord wishes to bring us in order to see the need for His mercy, which covers not only outward sins, but also the secrets, the inward sins of the heart. From today's Old Testament reading the Lord Himself says:

And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he *is* gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.¹⁶

¹⁴**Romans 7:7.**

¹⁵**Galatians 3:10.**

¹⁶**Joel 2:13.**

The Rev. Dr. Francis Pieper, past President of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, writes:

The Law is to be preached without diminution ..., but solely for the purpose of bringing man to a realization of his sinfulness and deserved condemnation. As soon as this purpose is attained, as soon as man asks in contrition, “What must I do to be saved?” the preaching of the Law should cease. It is a divine requirement, and not merely a church regulation, that terrified hearts should hear not the Law, but only the Gospel, which for Christ’s sake assures them just as they are ... of remission of sins and salvation, without the Law and the works of the Law. The Catechism sums up the matter in this fashion: “The Law is to be preached to the secure, the Gospel to terrified sinners.” In the words of Scripture (Rom. 10:4): “Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone that believeth,” the boundary between Law and Gospel is sharply defined, and Christ asserts the sole authority of the Gospel in the area of broken and humbled hearts when He declares the purpose of His mission to be “to preach the Gospel to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted,” (Is. 61:1; Luke 4:18). This line of demarcation between Law and Gospel is clearly fixed in the scriptures of both the Old and the New Testament, particularly by the practice of Christ and the Apostles.¹⁷

Christ atoned for our sins and, thereby, provides the bindings for mending our broken hearts through His Passion on the Cross. Christ’s Blessed Heart was broken for our impure hearts. In the midst of His Passion, Jesus says:

I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels. ... dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet.¹⁸

Again, Jesus says:

Reproach hath broken my heart; and I am full of heaviness: and I looked *for some* to take pity, but *there was* none; and for comforters, but I found none.¹⁹

¹⁷*Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III, pp. 230, 231.

¹⁸**Psalm 22:14, 16.**

¹⁹**Psalm 69:20.**

What could cause the Pure Heart of the Son of God to be so burdened and broken? Certainly, it was not anything He did, but rather because He bore our sins and iniquities and their requisite punishment.²⁰ The prophet Isaiah writes:

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he *was* wounded for our transgressions, *he was* bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace *was* upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.²¹

And, moreover, Christ was pure of heart in everything He did. Christ lived a holy life in deed, word, *and thought*. As our Substitute under the law, Christ loved the Lord our God with all of His Almighty Strength, and with all of His Righteous Mind, and with all of His Pure Soul, and with All of His Blessed Heart for us and He loved His neighbor perfectly for us.²² Now we have a pure heart in word, deed, *and thought* because Christ fulfilled the commandments in thought, word, and deed and has given that fulfillment to us through the Gospel.

And completing this work of atoning for our sins, Christ restored our hearts and our lives. Jesus says:

They that hate me without a cause are more than the hairs of mine head: they that would destroy me, *being* mine enemies wrongfully, are mighty: then I restored *that* which I took not away.²³

Christ had not taken our lives away from us; rather, we have forfeited them by our sins. Christ restored our lives by atoning for our sins.

Christ, then, atoned for all of our sins, including the sins of our heart.

²⁰This work is called Christ's *Passive Obedience*. "As my *Priest*, Christ *fulfilled the Law* in my stead perfectly (active obedience), *sacrificed Himself* for me (passive obedience), and still *intercedes* (pleads) for me with His heavenly Father." *The Small Catechism*, questions 132 B, p. 108.

²¹**Isaiah 53:4-5.**

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²³**Psalm 69:4.**

B. Christ applies His absolution won on the Cross immediately through the Gospel.

And Christ applies this cleansing work to us through the Gospel. St. Paul, therefore, connects Christ's atoning work on the Cross directly to the Blessed Waters of Holy Baptism:

... Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.²⁴

And this soothing washing of absolution comforts the heart, driving away the fear that God will condemn because of sin, and, through this comfort, binds up the heart. Hence, Jesus says:

The Spirit of the Lord *is* upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised.²⁵

What here in Christ's preaching do we hear of long, tortuous acts of contrition before the Good News of absolution? None. Indeed, Jesus says His purpose is to bind up the brokenhearted, letting the cat out of the bag.

But the secret was out much earlier. For the Lord says in today's Old Testament reading:

And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he *is* gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.²⁶

And where there is forgiveness of sin, there is life and salvation. Hence, we learned of the Sacrament in Catechism:

What is the benefit of such eating and drinking? That is shown us by these words, "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins"; namely, that in the Sacrament

²⁴**Ephesians 5:25, 26-27.**

²⁵**St. Luke 4:18.**

²⁶**Joel 2:13.**

forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.²⁷

Conclusion

Plainly, then, Lent is a season sorely misunderstood. Lent is not a season of overwrought contrition in order to save ourselves, but rather more intensely points us to Christ our Savior and the free salvation given us through the Gospel.

Lent, therefore, does not drive our hearts away from God, but draws them ever closer to Him through the Gospel, preserving us, thereby, steadfast in His Word and faith unto the life everlasting and the resurrection of the body.

Amen.

²⁷*The Small Catechism, The Sixth Chief Part: The Sacrament of the Altar*, p. 21.