

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” These words that are spoken over us this evening at the beginning of Lent as a cross of ashes is marked on our foreheads, are from Genesis 3, the end of the second creation story. They are spoken to the man, whom earlier in Genesis 2 God formed from the dust of the ground and into whom God breathed the breath of life. So it is a reminder of human morality, yes, which of course sounds like really bad news. How else are we supposed to receive a terminal diagnosis? And that news becomes even worse when they realize that they brought this on themselves. But it is also more than that. It is, strangely, also really good news for the man and the woman. And here’s why. Because they’re supposed to be dead already. God told them not to eat from the tree at the center of the garden, and said that if they did eat from it, or even touch it, they would die. But they have both touched and eaten the fruit, and they are not dead. Not yet. God is still with them. God is still speaking to them. And God will continue to care for them. Yes, their lives are about to get much harder, they will struggle in childbirth and struggle to put bread on the table, as it were. But their lives are not over. The breath of God still moves within them. And that is already grace.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Those same words spoken to the first humans, are also good news for *us*. They are an invitation to review and renew our relationship with God, whose breath also moves in us. And that, of course, is what the season of Lent is all about. Our lives right now are a gift, and God is still with us, and still speaking to us through Jesus Christ. And Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is given for just such a season as this.

A lot of our life is performative, like the hypocrites that Jesus exposes in our Gospel reading, right in the middle of that Sermon on the Mount. There are a lot of expectations placed upon us, and a lot of pressure to measure up to those expectations. We’re expected to be successful in life, to be good children, then good parents, good students and then good employees, productive members of society, patriotic citizens, faithful friends and spouses... the list goes on and on. We have good days and bad days in all of those different roles, maybe good years and bad years. But always there is the pressure to present ourselves as measuring up. And our social media only exacerbates that pressure, where we post only the most attractive things about ourselves and get the impression that everyone else is doing better than we are. But even if you’re off of social media, you are doing something like that in your daily life. “Hey, how are you doing?” we’re asked. “Great, how are you?” we respond. “Also great.” And nobody is great. But Jesus is as clear as can be here that our relationship with God cannot work that way. Practicing our piety in a showy way, to earn respect and admiration from others, is missing the point. We might get just what we’re looking for – respect and admiration – but we know that what we’re looking for is a lie, a performance, and ultimately it does nothing to our relationship with God, except maybe to distract us from it. So Jesus sends us to our rooms, away from the public eye, where we can pray to God in secret, where we can confront all those things about ourselves that we keep secret from others, where we are free be our true selves, exposed to God who sees in secret.

And when you pray, says Jesus, pray like this: Start by acknowledging who you’re talking to, with an awareness that God’s will might not be your will. Pray with an openness to the possibility that what God wants might ultimately be better than what you want, and that God’s way of ruling is not our way of ruling. Then ask for what you need: enough for today,

God's forgiveness, a willingness for us to forgive others, and deliverance from trying times and from evil.

Martin Luther, in his own prayer life, prayed like that, using the words of the Lord's Prayer as an outline that he would elaborate on. He also used the other parts of the catechism that way, the Creed and the Ten Commandments. Praying like that give us the opportunity to consider what is daily bread, what is truly needed and helpful, and what is daily distraction from our relationship with God and one another. Recognizing our own sinful self-centeredness and God's willingness to forgive us in order to preserve our relationship with God can open our hearts to likewise prioritize preserving our relationships with others. And praying to be spared from trials and delivered from evil can open our eyes and hearts to the suffering of others<sup>ß</sup> around us that we might help to relieve or even prevent.

When we practice our piety this way, we allow God to be God instead of presuming to take that roll for ourselves, as the man and woman in the garden did. But we also allow ourselves to be ourselves, and to face up to the reality of those hard words: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." *We are* dust, and to dust we *shall* return. But that is not the only thing that is true of us. We are also, in Holy Baptism, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. And that cross that we trace out and make visible on our foreheads tonight we receive with confidence that dust is not our final destiny. Because the cross of Jesus Christ is not a dead end, but the way to resurrection life, life that is genuine, abundant, and everlasting, life that is already ours right now by grace through faith.

May we treasure that gift of faith, and practice such piety. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.