

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

“Blow the trumpet in Zion,” says the prophet Joel in our first reading tonight. “call a solemn assembly.” But then Jesus says, “do *not* sound a trumpet before you” – that’s what hypocrites do. And “go into your room and pray in secret.” So, what to do? To trumpet or not to trumpet? To assemble to pray together, or to each go into our one rooms and pray alone? Then there was Jesus’ exhortation the Sunday before last to “let your light shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” But in today’s text, only a chapter later in Matthew, Jesus says, “when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.” Do your works in secret, in other words. So, which is it, Jesus? Let others see our works, or hide our good works so no one but God sees? If you are an Ash Wednesday regular, the irony of this Gospel text advising against public piety being read exactly on the day that we Lutherans are arguably the most public about our piety cannot have escaped your notice – especially when you walk out of church with an ash crosses marked on your forehead. So maybe we should get specific about how exactly we’re supposed to do this Lent thing.

Now, all of those contradictions that I have just set up for us come from a particular assumption about what Lent is meant to be, namely a thing that we’re supposed to do, rather than something that happens to us. We have a tendency to approach Lent as something we have to perform and get through rather than an opportunity to be opened to God working a new thing in our lives. I was only able to present an appearance of contradiction in these texts because I omitted important information. Joel does say “sound the trumpet and call a solemn assembly,” and that is certainly what we have done this evening. We don’t use trumpets for that, of course. We have published schedules, emailed announcements, and a web site for that. But Jesus does not at all say that we shouldn’t blow a trumpet to call people together to pray, if that’s what you do to call people together to pray. And he doesn’t either say never pray in public with others, like we have already been doing tonight. He himself prayed with his disciples in public, and went to the festivals at the temple, also in public. What Jesus is getting at here in our Gospel reading is intent. Notice how he qualifies all of his directions here. It’s not, “don’t blow a trumpet,” but “don’t blow a trumpet *in order that people may see you giving alms* and end up praising you for it.” He doesn’t say, “Don’t pray in public,” but “don’t pray in public in order to be seen by others so that they’ll think well of you.” And when you fast, don’t fast in order to show people what a good and pious person you are. Fast in secret so that you focus your attention on your relationship with God, and not on what other people think of you. And when Jesus said, two Sunday’s ago, to let people see your good works, he was careful to say that the purpose of doing that was so they would glorify God, not you.

Jesus’ point here is that self-promotion and self-interest belong to the values of this world. And those values are opposed to the kingdom of heaven that Jesus is ushering in. God’s values lie elsewhere, and this leads us back three weeks ago to the Beatitudes that began this Sermon on the Mount. When Jesus declares blessed exactly the kinds of people we tend to avoid and marginalize, he is showing us where God’s treasures is, and so where God’s heart is. Our text tonight is still part of that same sermon, so that what Jesus was doing there in opening our hearts to the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, those who mourn and so on is meant to be still borne in mind when we get to this part of the text. Because when our hearts are turned toward what God values, our own values and actions follow. To use Luther’s language, we get uncurled from

our self-centeredness and opened up to seeing and caring for our neighbors, especially our neighbors in need.

And when that happens, then we are ready for the discipline of Lent: self-examination and repentance, prayer and fasting, sacrificial giving and works of love, all made possible and empowered by the God's word and sacraments. We are ready to follow Jesus like disciples on his journey to the cross, where he takes our sin upon himself, and in exchange gives us his righteousness, his right relationship with God as God's own beloved child. But unlike the first disciples, we begin this yearly journey to the cross knowing the end of the story, and secure in our identity as children of God through our baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection that we remember and celebrate in this season. That identity gives us confidence for honest self-examination that does not shy away from naming and owning our complicity in the sin of the world that Jesus is working to take away. It gives us the security to turn to God with open hearts, to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and the faith the Spirit creates in us, and to express that faith in acts and attitudes of love, mercy, compassion, and solidarity with the world God loves.

We take the first step of the journey tonight by recognizing our mortality that is bound up in our sinful condition. "We are dust and to dust we shall return." But we are able to face that dreadful reality trusting God's promise that the dust is not our final destiny, and that this is also true: "we are dust, and *from* dust we shall return to share eternally the life God created us for, life that begins already today, and clings to Christ in faith all along the way of the cross.

May it be so. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.