

FOCUS: The Good News is

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

What have the people done? Why must the priests stand between the vestibule and the altar and weep? Why do they cry out for God to be merciful? Why?

Are these really the correct questions for us to be asking this evening? Are we really so self-contained and oblivious to the realities of the world around us that we can't figure it out on our own? The people have turned away from God, and God isn't pleased about it. God is trying to get their attention through the prophets, but it seems like the word of God is falling on deaf ears.

“Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast *love*.”¹ Even though the people have turned from God, God still tries to bring them back, offering them opportunity after opportunity to reconcile. God is a God of salvation and mercy, not one of death and destruction. Even the psalmist writes that only through the hand of God will the psalmist be made righteous and forgiven from all of his sins. Paul tells the Corinthians that they, too, are called to be reconciled with God. Here are centuries of Hebrew and Christian witness standing before us, yet many of us still don't get it.

Our reconciliation with God comes through the sacrifice *God* made by sending his Son to die for us. Our sacrifices are of no use to God. How could they be? God sacrificed his Son so that we sinful human beings would stand forever *inside* his covenant. What can we hope to offer an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving God that God doesn't already have?

Well, if not sacrifices, perhaps there are ways in which we can show God our appreciation and gratitude for all that God has done for us. In the Sermon on the Mount, from which the Gospel for Ash Wednesday comes, we hear Jesus offering us some ideas on how we might practice our faith and piety while giving thanks to God.

We can fast—that is, to abstain from food and, perhaps, water—for a period of time. In the history of the Hebrew people, they were required to fast prior to the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur, as a step in preparing to come before God and one another to reconcile and be reconciled. In the Christian tradition, fasting has had several forms. Ash Wednesday and Good Friday have long been considered “hard fast” days, during which Christians are encouraged, health permitting, to maintain the fast. Our Shrove Tuesday feasting is symbolic of that preparation for the great fast day of Ash

¹ Joel 2:13 (NRSV)

Wednesday. Others find the need to fast from a particular food—generally speaking, meat—on Fridays and sometimes on Wednesdays throughout Lent. However one might approach fasting, Jesus admonishes us that our act of fasting should not be a public show. No “complaining” about being hungry. No pained looks or drawn faces, so as to encourage others to ask why one looks so bad. Rather, keep a positive outlook and attitude so that no one knows you are fasting. God knows, and that’s all that matters.

We can pray as a sign of our piety and love for God and in thanksgiving for all God has given to us. Prayer is not the sole responsibility of the pastors and priests of the church. Prayer is for every one of the baptized. “But Pastor, I don’t know *how* to pray!” My dear sister or brother, let me assure you that your *do* know how to pray. Pray as our Lord Jesus taught us, saying “Our Father, who art in heaven...” As Luther reminds us in the Small Catechism, in the Lord’s Prayer we have everything for which we should pray and for which we should ask of or say to God. If you don’t have words of your own, use the words Jesus gave to you to use. But, when you pray, pray silently or quietly. Pray behind closed doors. Pray quietly in your pew. Pray while you drive down the highway—but please pray with your eyes open, then! God knows when you pray and he hears your prayers. There are times, of course, when we gather as a community and we offer prayers as a community, but these public prayers are not the ones to which Jesus is speaking as he speaks about the hypocrites. But when you pray alone, pray in private. Even if you are sitting in the middle of a restaurant with people all around you, give thanks to God for the food you are about to enjoy with a silent prayer.

Finally, Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount that we can demonstrate our piety and faith through almsgiving—that is, by presenting our tithes and offerings to God for the work of God’s people gathered together in ministry. We don’t make a big to-do about the offering time. No one is asked to come forward and offer a “challenge grant” or publicly pronounce a major gift to the church. Unlike colleges, hospitals, and other not-for-profit groups, we don’t send out a list of who gave how much money as part of our annual report, nor do we have brass plates or signs all around the building to declare that some particular item was given as a memorial or honorarium to the church. But note that Jesus does not say “*If* you give alms.” Rather, he says, “*When* you give alms,” do so in secret. Place your offering to God quietly into the offering plate, without cheer of fanfare. More importantly, don’t spend your time building up great amounts of earthly treasures. No one has ever seen a U-Haul in a funeral procession. God doesn’t want us to hoard things because he knows that we can’t take them with us. Rather, God wants us to put the things—time, talents, and treasures—which he has given to us to good use helping to care for our sisters and brothers who are in need, seeing to the growth and development of the body of Christ in this place and around the world, and otherwise ensuring the mission and ministry to which we, the baptized children of God, are called is accomplished.

Where are *your* treasures? What is most important to you? Is the salvation offered to you by the sacrifice God made in the death and resurrection of his Son important to you? Does it matter to you if you are saved—reconciled before God once and for all times? Where is *your* heart?

Return to the Lord. Place your heart where your treasures truly lie. Fast quietly. Pray unceasingly. Give freely. The trumpets sound when there is danger. In doing the work to which God has called, there is no danger, and there is no need for the trumpets to sound.