

Sermon followed by Service

**St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church
Ash Wednesday**



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I need to de-clutter. And I don't think I'm alone in that, am I? It was a Sunday afternoon, a couple weeks ago. We met at church. I had what I thought would be a short devotion from Ecclesiastes - "There is a time for everything." Someone latched onto the line: "a time to keep and a time to throw away." I think we all latched on to that line: "A time to keep and a time to throw away." We talked about how clutter around us clutters the mind inside us; how clutter around us can make our brain busy and stressed; how clutter can bog us down and squeeze the life out of us. Can I say this - our ladies even found a way to "improve" on wise King Solomon; instead of just "**a time to keep and a time to throw away,**" "a time to keep and a time to give away."

That thought fits so well with the season of Lent because Lent is when the days lengthen into Spring and Spring cleaning - not just Spring cleaning of our homes and yards and cars, but a Lent and Easter cleaning of our hearts and minds. And that thought - to simplify, to de-clutter, to throw away, and give away - fits well with our lesson because in our lesson we have one of the Bible's best examples of someone who knew how to simplify and de-clutter.

Who am I thinking of? She's one of the Mary-Martha sisters. Which one? My first guess would be Martha because I think of her busy making things right. But it's Mary who better shows us how to simplify and de-clutter.

How? How does Mary do it? Mary replaces get with give. I didn't come up with that. Jesus said something like that: "**It is better to give than to receive.**" So, replace get with give. Get clutters and gets in the way. Get. Get more. Get ahead. Get back. Get even. Get can make life miserable. Mary replaces get with give. Mary gives freely, extravagantly, joyfully.

Do you feel too busy, too bogged down? Squeezed? Your brain, your heart, your life cluttered and clouded? Think like Mary. Replace get with give.

Here's the context. In the chapter before our lesson, Mary's brother Lazarus dies. After four days, Jesus shows up, too late. But then Jesus goes to the tomb and shouts, "Lazarus, come out." And Lazarus comes out - alive!

That was the last straw. For the Jewish leaders, by raising Lazarus from death to life, Jesus moves from the category of "manageable nuisance" to the category of "serious threat." Jesus threatened their popularity, their power, their pride. "**So from that day on they made plans to put Him to death**" (John

11:53). As Jesus approaches Jerusalem - the day after our lesson is Palm Sunday), Jesus knows he's about to die, and he hasn't been shy in saying he was going to Jerusalem to die.

That's the context. Here's the cost. **"Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair."** How much did the ointment cost? A year's wages. Imagine that. Imagine pouring out a year's wages on the feet of Jesus. Can you imagine yourself living, loving, giving like Mary?

Judas couldn't; it hurt him to even see it. He gripes; he grumbles; he rips on Mary: **"Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?"** And why is Judas so put out? John tells us: **"He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it."**

The difference between Mary and Judas couldn't be more stark. Mary is a generous disciple. Judas is a greedy disciple. Mary sacrifices financially. Judas won't give a nickel. Mary shows her faith and love with action. Judas talks a good game - he talks about giving money to the poor - but he doesn't mean it. Mary gives with free abandon. Judas is stuck on get. Get more. Get ahead. Get on top. Get for self. And it will kill him.

Jesus knows. **"Leave her alone, for the day of My burial she kept it [the perfume]."** Mary knew what was coming. Perhaps she had heard what John the Baptist had said: **"Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."** Perhaps she heard Jesus himself say it: **"I am the Good Shepherd. I lay down my life for the sheep."** No doubt she knew how Jesus pointed ahead to Easter. And Easter opens the door to life. Jesus had told Mary's sister Martha: - **"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die."** If Mary wasn't singing Psalm 73: **"Earth has nothing I desire besides you,"** she certainly showed it. Mary knew she had everything she could ever need in Jesus.

Earlier I said that Mary was one of the best examples of someone who knew how to de-clutter. But we aren't here today because of Mary. We're here because of someone who is even better at de-cluttering. You know his invitation - **"Come to me, and I will give you rest."** You know his recipe for de-cluttering and simplifying; he told busy, busy, busy Martha: **"Only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."** And you know what he has done to de-clutter, to clear out and clear away the worst of our clutter.

You know the clutter I'm talking about. I'm thinking of the sin and guilt that we litter throughout our lives; we're not just a little messy and cluttered with sin; our sin and guilt are a toxic waste that disgusts God and would turn God against us. I'm thinking of the sin and shame that clouds our hearts and minds, the shame that makes us feel so small and angry. I'm thinking of the pride and selfishness that jams up our love. I could go on, but you know the sin that clutters your heart and mind, don't you?

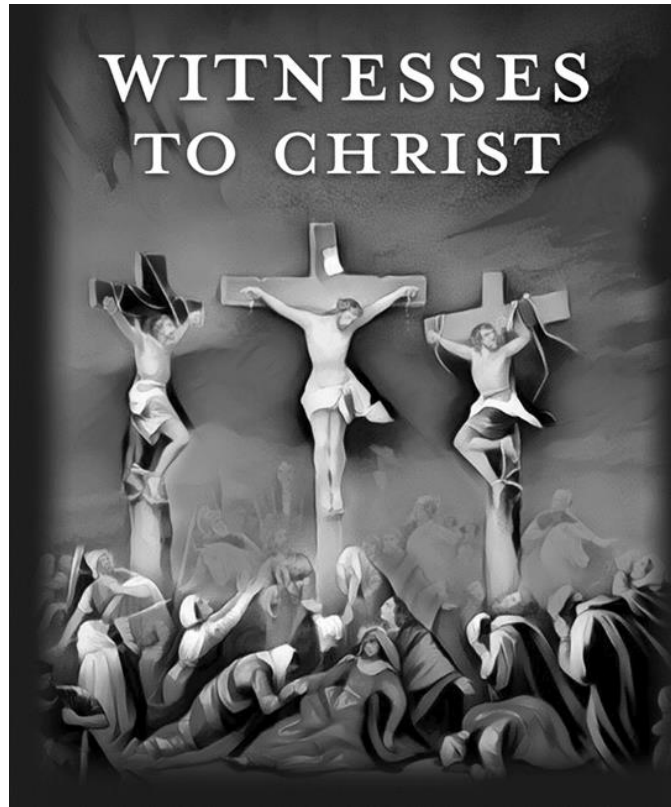
Jesus took it all as his own; he didn't leave any behind; he took it all to the cross. And there he paid the price, the fine, the penalty for our toxic waste. There he cleared the way for you to live forgiven and free, pure and right by God. You know what that means? The door is open for you to all of God's promises: "I've got you; I'll make life right for you; I've got heaven for you forever!" What does that mean? With Jesus, you have everything you could ever need.

Mary knew she had everything she could ever need in Jesus. And that set Mary free to de-clutter. And I don't just mean de-clutter by giving up her perfume. With Jesus, Mary was free to de-clutter her heart and mind. She didn't need to hold on to her fears and worries. With Jesus, Mary didn't need to hold on to special stuff to feel special; she didn't need to hold on to more stuff to feel like more. With Jesus, Mary didn't need to hold on to her pride ("What will people think of me?"). With Jesus, Mary didn't need to hold on for self. With Jesus, Mary was free to de-clutter the distractions that would distract her from Jesus; free to de-clutter the temptations that would tempt her away from Jesus; she was free to de-clutter her heart and mind, her life - to live in the peace and hope of Jesus. Why? Mary knew she had everything she could ever need in Jesus. And so do you! Amen.

Ash Wednesday

February 22, 2023

IN OUR WORSHIP TODAY ... We observe Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday worship does not look, sound, or feel like any other service. It is a service that includes unusual, and perhaps, uncomfortable elements: the pastor's black robe, the somber and serious tunes, the look and feel of dirty ash on a rough banner, the moments of silence for reflection, and a message that echoes God's curse placed not only on Adam and Eve, but on us as well: "For dust you are and to dust you will return." With this on our hearts, we are called to heed King David's plea: "Put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption." God bless your worship this evening.



John the Baptist
Mary, the Sister of Lazarus and Martha
Malchus
Peter
Barabbas
Pontius Pilate

OPENING HYMN

"Jesus, I Will Ponder Now"

Hymn 420

(St. 1-3)

INSTRUCTION FOR THE BEGINNING OF LENT

P: Brothers and sisters in Christ, God created us to know joy in communion with him, to love all humanity, and to live in harmony with all creation. But sin separates us from God, our neighbors, and creation, and so we do not enjoy the life our Creator intended for us. By our sin we grieve our Father, who does not desire us to come under his judgment, but to turn to him and live. Therefore, God in his mercy has sent our Lord Jesus Christ to take our place under the law, to suffer for us, and to die the death we deserve. God made Jesus, who had no sin, to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

During the forty days of Lent we fix our eyes on Jesus, as the Author and Perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of God. The time of Lent reminds us that to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, we must also know the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. As disciples of the Lord Jesus we are called to struggle against everything that leads us away from love of God and neighbor.

I invite you, therefore, to confess your sins, ask our Father for forgiveness, and commit yourselves to this struggle. Isaiah leads us to see and confess our wrong against the Lord. He shows us we can confess and repent with confidence and hope: the Lord has worked salvation. He has come and will come again as Redeemer for his people.

FIRST LESSON

Isaiah 59:12-20

For our offenses are many in your sight,
and our sins testify against us.
Our offenses are ever with us,
and we acknowledge our iniquities:

rebellion and treachery against the LORD,
turning our backs on our God,
fomenting oppression and revolt,
uttering lies our hearts have conceived.

So justice is driven back,
and righteousness stands at a distance;
truth has stumbled in the streets,
honesty cannot enter.

Truth is nowhere to be found,
and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey.
The LORD looked and was displeased
that there was no justice.

He saw that there was no one,
he was appalled that there was no one to intervene;
so his own arm worked salvation for him,
and his own righteousness sustained him.

He put on righteousness as his breastplate,
and the helmet of salvation on his head;
he put on the garments of vengeance
and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak.

According to what they have done,
so will he repay
wrath to his enemies
and retribution to his foes;
he will repay the islands their due.

From the west, men will fear the name of the LORD,
and from the rising of the sun, they will revere his glory.
For he will come like a pent-up flood
that the breath of the LORD drives along.

“The Redeemer will come to Zion,
to those in Jacob who repent of their sins,”
declares the LORD.

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

P: Let us be silent. Let us be still. Let us pause now for a time of reflection and self-examination.

Silence for reflection and self-examination

CONFESSION OF SINS

P: Most holy and merciful Father,

C: we confess to you and to one another that we have sinned by our own fault, by our own grievous fault, in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.

P: We have not loved you with our whole heart and mind and strength.

We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

We have not forgiven others as we have been forgiven.

C: Have mercy on us, Lord.

P: We have been deaf to your call to serve as Christ served us.

We have not been true to the mind of Christ.

We have grieved the Holy Spirit.

C: Have mercy on us, Lord.

P: We confess to you, Lord, all our past unfaithfulness.

The pride, hypocrisy, and impatience in our lives

C: we confess to you, O Lord.

P: Our self-indulgent appetites and ways, our manipulation of other people

C: we confess to you, O Lord.

P: Our anger when our selfish aims are denied,
and our envy of those more fortunate than ourselves
C: **we confess to you, O Lord.**

P: Our love of worldly goods and comforts,
and our dishonesty in daily life and work
C: **we confess to you, O Lord.**

P: Our negligence in worship and prayer,
and our failure to show the faith that is in us
C: **we confess to you, O Lord.**

P: Forgive us, Lord, for the wrongs we have done. For our blindness to human
need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty,
C: **forgive us, O Lord.**

P: For all false judgments, for uncharitable thoughts toward others, and for our
prejudice and contempt for those who differ from us,
C: **forgive us, O Lord.**

P: For what we think or say or do that is at variance with your will,
C: **forgive us, O Lord.**

P: Restore us, good Lord, and let your anger depart
C: **Hear us, Lord, for your mercy is great.**

THE CONFESSION OF THE ASH BANNER (see page 12)

*As we make our confession on the Ash Banner,
consider the cross with hymns found in
the Lent and Passion sections of our new hymnal - Christian Worship, 393-437.*

ORGAN MEDITATION

"God So Loved the World (from "The Crucifixion")
John Stainer, arranged by Sam Ellson

ABSOLUTION

P: Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, does not desire the death of
sinners, but rather that they turn from their wickedness and live.

In love he has been merciful to us and has given his only Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Therefore, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

During these days of Lent, let us implore God to give us renewal and his Holy Spirit. May we continue to abide in the true faith, and at the last, be received by him through the merits of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

C: Amen.

P: Accomplish in us, O God, the work of your salvation

C: that we may show forth your glory in the world.

P: By the cross and suffering of your Son, O Lord,

C: bring us with all your saints to the joy of his resurrection.

HYMN

"Jesus, I Will Ponder Now"

Hymn 420

(St. 4-6)

SERMON

PRAYER AND LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

THE SACRAMENT

(Guests, please see our communion practice on p. 2)

(Gluten free wafers are available; please see Pastor.)

M: The Lord be with you.

C: And also with you.

M: Lift up your hearts.

C: We lift them up unto the Lord.

M: Let us give thanks to the Lord, our God.

C: **It is good and right so to do.**

M: It is truly good and right that we should at all times and in all places give you thanks, O Lord, holy Father, almighty and everlasting God, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who willingly died under the curse of this world's sin so that we may live forever in the light of God's blessing.

Therefore with all the saints on earth and hosts of heaven, we praise your holy name and join their glorious song:

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY

**O holy, holy, holy
Lord God of pow'r and might,
Your glory, earth and heaven
In countless ways recite.
Hosanna! Come and save us,
Lord God of hosts on high,
And in your grace and mercy
Receive our fervent cry.**

**Hosanna in the highest!
How truly blest is he
Who in God's name is coming
To set his people free!
He comes to bring salvation
And with his blood outpoured,
Deliver us from bondage—
Hosanna, mighty Lord!**

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

M: Blessed are you, O Lord of heaven and earth. We praise and thank you for sending your Son, Jesus Christ, and we remember the great acts of love through which he has ransomed us from sin, death, and the devil's power.

By his incarnation, he became one with us.

By his perfect life, he fulfilled your holy will.

By his innocent death, he overcame hell.

By his rising from the grave, he opened heaven.

Invited by your grace and instructed by your Word, we approach your table with repentant and joyful hearts. Strengthen us through Christ's body and blood, and preserve us in the true faith until we feast with him and all his ransomed people in glory everlasting.

C: **Amen.**

WORDS OF INSTITUTION

M: Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night he was betrayed, took bread; and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my † body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Then he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; this is my † blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."

M: The peace of the Lord be with you always.

C: Amen.

LAMB OF GOD *Agnus Dei*

Lamb of God, you take a - way the
sin of the world; have mer - cy on us.
Lamb of God, you take a - way the sin of the
world; have mer - cy on us. Lamb of God,
you take a - way the sin of the world;
grant us your peace. A - men.

DISTRIBUTION HYMN

"Jesus, Grant that Balm and Healing"
Hymn 404

SONG OF SIMEON *Nunc Dimittis*

O Lord, now let your servant
Depart in peace, assured:
For I have seen your promised
Incarnate, saving Word –
A Light that will enlighten
All gloom where Gentiles dwell;
The brilliant, crowning glory
Of those in Israel!

All glory to the Father,
All glory to the Son,
All glory to the Spirit,
Forever three in one;
For as in the beginning,
Is now, shall ever be,
God's triune name resounding
Through all eternity.

CLOSING PRAYER

M: We give you thanks, O Lord, for the foretaste of the heavenly banquet that you have given us to eat and to drink in this sacrament. Through this gift you have fed our faith, nourished our hope, and strengthened our love. By your Spirit help us to live as your holy people until that day when you will receive us as your guests at the wedding supper of the Lamb, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

BLESSING

M: The Lord bless you and keep you.
The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.
The Lord look on you with favor and give you peace. **Amen.**

CLOSING HYMN

"Abide with Me"
Hymn 783

Lent Customs and Opportunities

The Color Purple - the color of royalty reminds us of Christ as our King, willing to be crowned with thorns, willing to sacrifice himself for his people, fighting our battle against Satan and evil, winning our victory for life. When we see what our king was willing to go through for us, the color purple also becomes the color of repentance - our commitment to live with Christ as King.

Lenten Self-Denial Offering - some Christians find that giving up (sacrificing) some normal part of life (meat, candy, TV, for example) helps them consider Jesus' sacrifice for them. Some Christians find that a special gift (perhaps the savings from what they gave up) for Christ's church is a meaningful way to thank Jesus. Special gifts can be given for the special work of the church (any Lent offering envelope) or designated for a special project with the special offering envelope.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, the Christian's 40-day journey with the Lord to the cross and tomb, preparing for the proclamation of Easter. The 40 days are reminiscent of several biblical events: Jesus' 40-day fast at the beginning of his ministry, Moses' stay on Mount Sinai at the giving of the Law, Elijah's fast on his way to the mountain of God.

Ash Wednesday begins the Christian's Lenten journey with a reminder of our mortality and a call to repentance (Genesis 18:27; Job 46:6; Jeremiah 6:26; Matthew 11:21). The ancient practice of imposing ashes on the foreheads of the faithful gives Ash Wednesday its name. The church father Tertullian (A.D. 160-215) writes of the practice as a public expression of repentance and of our human frailty that stands in need of Christ. The ashes remind us forcefully of our need for redeeming grace as they recall words from the rite for Christian burial: "...earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust..." words, that will someday be spoken over us all. The imposition of ashes has never been an exclusively Roman Catholic practice and today is observed by Christians of many traditions.

Ashes on Ash Wednesday

For thousands of years, God's people have used ashes as a sign of sorrow over sin. For hundreds of years, Christ's Church has used ashes at the beginning of the season of Lent, now known as Ash Wednesday, to express our sorrow over sin.

We won't be placing ashes on your foreheads, but we will use ashes as a way to make the "confession we say" into a "confession we see" by marking our confession with ash. In our Ash Wednesday service we will have the opportunity to step forward, dip our finger into a bowl of ash, and place our mark in the form of a cross on a burlap banner. We will then wipe our fingers clean and return to our seats.

Why make a mark with ash? The symbolism is rich:

- we make our individual mark acknowledging our individual guilt
- we make our marks together confessing our common sinfulness
- we feel the rough texture of burlap - our sorrow and Christ's cross are rough and pained
- we mark the sign of the cross - the cost of our sin - declaring our confidence in Christ as our Savior.

Not everyone will feel comfortable joining in this symbolism, so don't feel pushed. Feel free to participate as you are comfortable. Or feel free not to participate. Either way, feel free in the forgiveness of Christ!

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