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Text: Matthew 6:1-6

Date: March 1, 2017

Setting: Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, Ash Wednesday

Facing Our Sins

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Have you ever tried to pull the wool over someone's eyes? You know, play a trick on them? A pastor tells of a time when he saw a young boy trying to trick his mom into thinking he had a snake in his backpack. Even though the snake was fake, for a moment his mother thought it was real. How did the pastor know? He could see it in her face. And how did the pastor know the little boy was loving every minute of it? He could see it in the boy's face as he tried to hold in his grin.

If you were watching the story happen on TV and you muted the volume, the story would have read much the same. The boy's face would have still revealed how he really felt. Well, believe it or not, the same principle applies to our Gospel reading for today. You can see all you need to know in the expressions on one's face. Jesus was teaching against the way of those who were hypocrites—a word which literally means “two-faced”—the ones who put on one face, but in their heart is another. There is nothing authentic about them. They confess one thing, and believe another.

Jesus was teaching the disciples that they should be authentic as they walked the way of God's chosen people. Jesus didn't have to look very far for examples. He picked three obvious and well known ways that people loved to receive attention for their zealous love of God—or so they want others to think. They simply want the recognition of others.

First, we have Jesus addressing those who give to the needy, but do so with great fanfare—in the synagogues, on the streets, everywhere! You can just see their faces as they draw attention to themselves. An example of this would be when you drive down the road and see people standing along the street wearing bright clothes, perhaps dressed in a costume, or holding a giant arrow pointing to the store they work for. It all says, “Look at me, look at where I work.” Imagine wearing that outfit and giving to the needy on the side of the road. As an employee wears a bright outfit or costume to draw attention to themselves, people were giving to the poor and wanting the focus to be on them solely, so that when people went by, they took notice of the good thing they were doing. Look at me, look at what I’m doing.

Yet Jesus calls the disciples to give to the needy, but to do so in secret, where their face is not seen. It is then that true care and humility are expressed.

Second, Jesus addresses prayer. As a Vicar, it is a great privilege to lead you in prayer within the divine service and in gatherings. But Jesus calls out against those who do so “to be seen by men.” You can picture the seriousness on their faces and hear the flowing language of their prayers. Once again—the hypocrite prays only to be commended by others, not because they have the welfare of others and the praise of God on their hearts. Look at me, look at what I’m doing.

Jesus calls the disciples to pray in solitude where only God can see their faces and know the sincerity of the prayers that are on their hearts.

Finally, the teaching addresses fasting. This is not commonplace in today’s society as a spiritual discipline, although some of you have likely given up something for Lent. Jesus notes that the hypocrites fast and everyone knows it because they “disfigure their faces to show others

they are fasting.” This would be equivalent to walking around with a look on their face that is much different than normal. A face that invites the question, “Are you ok?” or “What is wrong?” To invite the question means they want recognition. Look at me, look at what I’m doing.

Jesus tells the disciples that in the midst of their fasting they should clean up their faces so that it isn’t obvious to others that they are in a time of challenge.

Do you see yourself in this teaching? As we came forward and received ashes today we can recall the truth that we struggle with the very issues that Jesus is addressing.

It is nice to be noticed when we go over and above for others, even when our heart is in the right place.

I want to be a good public prayer—even if my prayers are purely authentic.

I want the support of others when I have made a difficult life choice —as I fast from something.

It seems as if God has created a no-win situation here! And we can see this in all of our lives as we struggle to live as God would have us live.

While Jesus’ teaching is specific to these examples, it is really about something else—it is about having our hearts in the right place.

Jesus concludes this teaching by pointing us to treasures. If we treasure recognition by men rather than treasuring God’s forgiveness, his patience, his grace, his love, his Word, his Son, then our faces are the faces of hypocrites. If our treasure is simply looking back inward to ourselves, then we are focusing on our own glory, and not God’s. That is why we really need to face our sins this Lent.

But when our faces are set not toward ourselves, but towards our Savior they reflect him in our lives. Today our faces bear a black cross of ashes to remind us of God’s words to Adam—

“for dust you are and to dust you will return.” Sin has taken us to this place. And while we know that our lives on this earth will one day come to a close, we know that we have a Savior who is God and man. Look at Christ, look at what Christ has done.

Just last weekend we witnessed His glory in the transfiguration as His face shone like the sun. It is in His glory that we know God is at work in our lives today and in all eternity. Look at Christ, look at what Christ has done.

Therefore, we go forth today wearing the cross, for the world to see. We don't do so for our recognition, but that others may see it in your face—that Jesus is your rescue from sin and your certain hope today and for all eternity. Look at Christ, look at what Christ has done. Amen.

"Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine... to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen."

Ephesians 3:20-21

