

Ash Wednesday  
March 9, 2011


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Minneapolis, Minnesota

+ Jesu juva +

## PARABLES OF LENT - THE PRODIGAL SON

Luke 15:11-32

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

et us change our raiment for sackcloth and ashes. Let us fast and mourn before the Lord." So we said a few minutes ago before receiving ashes on our foreheads as a sign of penitence in the face of our sin and our eventual coming death. Fasting and repentance have long been a part of the church's Lenten practices. The season of Lent began out of the practice of preparing catechumens for baptism, of course. But already in the fourth and fifth centuries we see this season taking on a penitential character for others in the church as well. It was the time when, along with the catechumens who were ceremonially (and in reality it is hoped) repenting and turning away from their former ways of life, others who had sinned in some notable way were enrolled as penitents too, preparing to be restored to the fellowship of the church at the Easter feast. It did not take long, only a few centuries, for this practice to become a general practice for all of the faithful who began to fast right along with the penitents and the catechumens. Soon all had ashes placed upon their heads as a recognition of the continued need for repentance and as a reminder of the death all must face on account of sin.

And so now we gathered here this night are engaged in the same practice. And we are reminded by it to turn our hearts away from our sinful ways and inclinations and back to God and Christ. The ashes are but the outward sign of what is to be a true repentance in our lives, the fasting too an outward observance to train oneself in self-denial and discipline, as one mourns over one's sins while trusting in the grace of God to forgive through Christ Jesus.

We learn from the Small Catechism regarding the prayer for forgiveness within the Lord's Prayer: "We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look upon our sins, nor deny such petitions on account of them; for we are worthy of none of the things for which we pray, neither have we deserved them; but that He would grant them all to us by grace; for we daily sin much, and indeed deserve nothing but punishment. So will we verily, on our part, also heartily forgive and also readily do good to those who sin against us." The main theme here is again penitence on our part, forgiveness on God's.

But what if the penitence remains unresolved. What if the ashes placed on your head are a permanent sign, not on the body, but on the soul. What if the Father refuses at long last to forgive? Hasn't the thought ever crossed your mind?

When you come to the altar of God for the umpteenth time seeking forgiveness and grace, knowing that you have not changed as you should - that while you do repent you know that you are not quite as heartily sorry as you should be, and that your repentance is not as sincere as it ought to be because the same sins still rise up within your heart and mind, sometimes even as you are trying to repent of them - do you wonder if God will finally say "enough of this!"?

We turn here to the parable of the Prodigal son. I have little doubt that all of you are familiar with this story where the younger son treats his father as if he were dead already, asking for his inheritance ahead of time, and then going off and squandering it all wastefully and wantonly. But when he returns home seeking grace from his father, is he turned away? Does the father throw up his hands in disgust and say what is this you have done against me and against my household? How dare you come back here again!? No; he does none of those things. Rather he receives his son home with rejoicing. He is so pleased at this return that he



runs to him, embraces and kisses him, dresses him in fine clothing and throws a feast to celebrate! This is how God the Father is toward us. And what is required of you? only that you make your way home to him; that in repentance you turn to Him for mercy and trust Him to receive you. That's it.

In the parable there is, however, an elder brother who thinks this is all wrong. He gets angry that his father has welcomed back the younger brother and refuses to have any part of it. This brother would require more, much more. But he's wrong. The grace is the father's to give, and he wills to give it. This is, of course, spoken against those who refuse to forgive or even to allow others to be received back in forgiveness by the church.

But we have an elder brother who is quite different from the one in the story. In our case our Elder Brother does not begrudge us the Father's mercy, but goes before us to secure it. He takes of His own and purchases, as it were, our return. He gives up His throne to come down to take our place in the swine yard of this world. And He suffers everything our wantonness, our sin, has deserved. You are signed this day with ashes in the form of the cross. He underwent what those ashes call for. He died your death upon the cross to release you from the power of sin and death. And He rose again and ascended to the Father to prepare for your homecoming. It is this Elder Brother, Jesus Christ, who has sent out His servants to call you home, who has greeted you with His peace, who has clothed you with His own spotless garments, who throws a feast of His own flesh and blood to refresh you and to celebrate His victory for you, who

has brought you back from death to life and now shares the riches of His own inheritance with you. And again, I ask, what is required of you? Only that you believe, and that believing you return with Him and seek the Father's grace through Him.

And so there can be no doubt that God the Father will be gracious to you, that He will always answer your cries for mercy with His own cry of forgiveness. These ashes will not be a permanent sign upon you. They are answered by Christ's death and washed by Christ's own blood. And so as you fast and repent this holy season, you may do so in faith and in joy, knowing that you are forgiven and have the riches of the Father's love through Christ Jesus, our Elder Brother and Lord. So, "let us fast and mourn before the Lord. For our God is merciful to forgive sins." Amen.

+ Soli Deo gloria +

