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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/9/2011, Ash Wednesday
Matthew 6:1-8, 16-21

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

My text is from our Gospel Lesson. Let me read it aloud for you, this time from the *King James Version*:

But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. (Matthew 6:7, KJV)

The older I get, the more clear some things seem to me. One of them concerns prayer. I have decided that it is okay to pray a few, simple, heartfelt words. Prayers do not need to be flowery.

Year by year, I attend a retreat for a clergy group called “The St. Gregory of Nazianzus Society.” We are old friends in that Society, most of us going back to seminary days. I hope you have friends like these old friends. We are the kinds of friends who can say just about anything to one another because we know that whatever we say, we say with love for one another.

At our recent retreat, this past February, I offered a simple table grace. There are no assignments for table grace. That is one of the ways in which we are not well organized. We simply gather around our tables and stand there until one of us gives the table grace. So, I led us in prayer. It was early in the retreat, and it was on my mind to be grateful, not only for the food, but also for the safe travel by which we had gathered from hither and yon, driving in wintry weather. So, that’s what I did. I offered thanks to our heavenly Father for our safe travel and for the food. Amen.

Then a puzzled look came on the face of one my old friends, and he said, “That was a short prayer.” I was going to apologize, “Well, I have a simple mind and that was what was on it,” but my friend Jonathan Jenkins answered for me. He simply smiled and said, “I think short prayers are fine. After all, our Lord Jesus does not favor really *long* prayers.” “But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.” (Matthew 6:7, KJV)

So, that’s my story, and I’m sticking with it: short, simple prayers are okay.

What I have said about prayer, I can also say about the other traditional forms of piety. The traditional disciplines of Lent are repentance, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. I have spoken so far about prayer. Now I want to say about the other traditional disciplines the same thing: they can all be done with simplicity, by plain, ordinary Christians. They can all be done with humble, heartfelt effort.

Consider almsgiving, for example. When you do your taxes, I bet you will find that you have entries under the category of “charitable contributions.” Give yourself some credit, then, for almsgiving.

Likewise, if you participate in community volunteer programs, like our congregation’s Meals on Heels program, then feel good about that. That is a plain and helpful form of almsgiving which we can support with a humble and innocent heart.

St. Francis gave his coat away to a beggar. In the end, he gave away all his possessions for the sake of the poor. Maybe you will not follow him to that wonderful degree, but still you can turn to works of love in our community. As best you can, you can turn to some good deeds for your neighbor.

Next, fasting. Somehow, we need to regain some self-mastery. Over-eating might not be a temptation for you, or failing to eat might be unhealthy for you. Then seek other areas of your life where things are somehow out of control. The point of fasting is to express in good, concrete fashion that we belong to Christ and therefore cannot afford to let our lives be blown along by every gust of fashion, lust, or laziness. A great verse of scripture lying behind the traditional discipline of fasting comes from St. Paul:

¹⁹Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; ²⁰you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20, RSV)

Now, let’s discuss the broadest and most fundamental of Lenten disciplines: repentance. Here I would like to linger, even to be a bit autobiographical.

Later in this liturgy, we will sing the hymn *Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling*. I did not choose this hymn, but I am awfully glad that Gwen did. It brings back strong and good memories for me of my childhood. In the American pietist tradition, that hymn is an “altar call” hymn. Dear old Sister Jacobs would quietly play that hymn on the piano while Rev. Dukes would appeal to us to repent, turn from sin, and give our hearts to the Lord. I did so when I was a boy, more than once. I got up from my pew, came forward and knelt at the altar rail, and with the help of the prayers of Rev. Dukes, my mother, and other mature Christians, I prayed through to victory.

But, sinful fellow that I am, I backslid, and so I had to go to the altar rail again. Sister Jacobs would play *Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling* or *Just As I Am, Without One Plea*. Rev. Dukes would appeal to the sinner. And again, I would go forward and folks would help pray me through to victory.

And then I was good again, for a while. But then I backslid again. Eventually, it became rather embarrassing to go forward to the altar rail again. And really! Shame on me for such repeated backsliding! In any case, I stopped going to the altar rail because I was embarrassed. But I was conscience of my sin and of my need for God’s forgiveness, and so I was left in spiritual turmoil. It was a serious

matter for me. I remained in turmoil for quite a while, until, at last, I had an important conversation with my father -- a conversation that led me eventually to become a Lutheran.

That is a story for another day. For now, I want simply to emphasize to you that repentance need not be so dramatic or traumatic as it was in my youth. It does not require lovely hymns played softly on the piano or the gentle, fatherly tones of the Pastor to draw you to Christ. You have the Lord's Prayer. You have authorization from Jesus himself to pray to the heavenly Father, "and forgive us our trespasses, forgive our sins." You have the patient invitation of Christ himself:

²⁸Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30, KJV)

Altogether, you can do this thing! You can turn to repentance, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. You do not need to be a saint. Your piety does not need to be spectacular, demanding the attention of everyone in sight. Your piety does not need to be perfect and eternal, but can lurch along by fits and starts if need be.

So it was with the Twelve. They were the very disciples of our Lord Jesus, blessed to walk with him day by day, privileged to hear his sweet preaching and to witness his deeds of mercy and love. Yet they were a fickle group, sometimes saying and doing things that pleased our Lord, sometimes misunderstanding him, and in the end, breaking his heart by abandoning him as his Cross drew near. But as best they could, they walked with Jesus. And when they had failed him and abandoned him, they returned to him when they had the chance -- all except for Judas who despaired and underestimated the patience of Jesus and his willingness to forgive.

The key thing is the direction in which we are walking. Are we walking toward Jesus or away from him? There are just these two choices. I want us to renew our walk toward Jesus. That's what the Lenten disciplines are for. That is the aim of Christian piety: to direct our path toward back Jesus.

Now, when we try our hand at the traditional disciplines of Lent, we become subject to a temptation lurking within the pious life. It is the vice called "vainglory." The issue is the intentions of the heart. Repentance, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving are all good, yet they are not as good as they could be if the heart is somehow double-minded -- if the heart is seeking not only *to do* good, but also *to be seen* doing the good.

In this evening's Gospel Lesson, Jesus warns us against vainglory:

Beware of practicing your piety before others *in order to be seen* by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.
(Matthew 6:1, NRSV)

And so it is that our Lord warns us against one of the tricks of the devil: vainglory. Vainglory is the eternal temptation accompanying virtue. It haunts piety like a ghost. It would spoil things if it could. The devil hates it when we turn our hands to the traditional deeds of piety: repentance, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. But if he cannot stop us from practicing our piety, at least he can try to corrupt our piety by urging us to brag about it. That's what vainglory is: it is a kind of deceit according to which we *appear* to be doing good for others when really we are seeking good for ourselves. We are seeking the admiration and praise of others for our good deeds.

And we are not wrong to seek the approval of an audience, only let that audience be heaven and the Maker of heaven and earth himself:

“For what,” saith He, “dost thou wish? Is it not to have some to be spectators of what is going on? Behold then, thou hast some; not angels, nor archangels, but the God of all.” And if thou desire to have men also as spectators, neither of this desire doth He deprive thee at the fitting season, but rather in greater abundance affords it unto thee. For, if thou shouldst now make a display, thou wilt be able to make it to ten only, or twenty, or (we will say) a hundred persons: but if thou take pains to lie hid now, God Himself will then proclaim thee in the presence of the whole universe.... (Chrysostom, Homily on St. Matthew 6:1-23)

In this manner, seeking the approval of God above all else, we will lay up for ourselves “treasure in heaven,” till that day when we reach that good land, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.