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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
2/10/2016, Ash Wednesday
2 Corinthians 5:17 - 6:10

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text is from this evening's Epistle Lesson, from 2 Corinthians 6.
St. Paul writes this:

... we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain. (2
Corinthians 6:1, RSV)

When Ash Wednesday comes around each year, I often find myself thinking of one of our elderly sisters in the Lord. Her name is Kathryn. For many of us, she is our "mother in the Lord," in the same way that many of the Lutheran clergy in metro New York refer to Rev. Thomas Nelson Green as "Father Green." It is a title of respect – not a title that Father Green seeks, but simply one that easily springs from the heart of the clergy. So it is with Kathryn. Many of us think of her as our mother in the Lord, and we are very grateful to God for her.

So, one Ash Wednesday, Kathryn mentioned to me, with a look of wonder on her face, that earlier that day, at nearby Starbucks, a young woman had looked at her and said, "Ma'am, you have a black smudge on your forehead." Born and bred courteous, Kathryn thanked the young lady for her words, but said that it was okay – that the black smudge was ashes from the Ash Wednesday service. The thing that struck Kathryn with wonder is that this young lady had no idea what Kathryn was talking about. Kathryn worried about that.

So do I. Each year, Parish Secretary Karen Rombey and I stand out on the sidewalk following the noon liturgy in order to offer the ashes to passersby. Doormen and shopkeepers, nannies and people on their lunch break from work, even taxi drivers roll down their windows or hop out of their taxis to get the ashes. But last year, things were different. It felt as if fewer people were interested in the ashes. Fewer people seemed even to understand the idea of ashes on Ash Wednesday.

Glad to say, this year was better. Lots of people on the sidewalks wanted this ashes this afternoon.

Let love divine flash down from heaven and strike us, right in the heart, and make us a holy people. That is how I view the ashes of Ash Wednesday. Those ashes are formed in the shape of a cross, which is our great hope in this world. The cross on our forehead marks us as people who trust in Christ and his righteousness, rather than in our own merits and virtues. We cling to the cross and believe that Jesus died that we might have eternal life with him. We love that old cross – the cruel instrument by which Jesus won salvation for us.

But also I think of that ashy cross on our forehead as a target – yeah a target for the Holy Spirit. Flash down and strike me! the ashes say. Flash down on me, and transform me, that I not be as St. Paul says – one who accepts “the grace of God in vain” (2 Corinthians 6:1).

There is a better way to make this point, but it requires that we back up a bit in our scripture reading from Second Corinthians. Our text speaks of receiving God’s grace “in vain.” It is a troubling text – one that puts us in mind of the saying of Jesus, Many will say, Lord, Lord, but I will declare to them, I never knew you; depart from me.¹ That is, St. Paul is referred to the phenomenon of fruitlessness. It is possible to receive God’s grace, but “in vain,” without fruit, without inner transformation.

All of this is true. But I want to look at this same point, but put it in a more positive light. And for that, I need to back up a bit in St. Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians.

In the chapter before our text, the apostle speaks of the foundation of the gospel – the sure footing on which hope exists in this world. St. Paul puts it this way:

[Christ] died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. (2 Corinthians 5:15, RSV)

The apostle says that Christ was “made sin,” that we might be delivered from our sin:

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21, RSV)

Then, on this foundation of what Christ has done, even died that we might live, St. Paul comes to the positive possibility I want to lift up for us today – the possibility of becoming new:

Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. (2 Corinthians 5:17, RSV)

It is to be with Christians as Jesus said to Nicodemus long ago:

¹ ²²On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ ²³And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.’ (Matthew 7:22-23, RSV)

Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3, RSV)

Our opening text had spoken about receiving the grace of God “in vain” – a grim possibility. This earlier text also speaks of a possibility – but a glorious possibility this time: the possibility lying before us that we should become new – that we should become new creatures on earth.

This congregation, Immanuel Lutheran Church, has always been an important congregation, in my opinion. From our beginnings back in the Civil War to this very day, we have been an important force and consolation in the lives of many people. But now, we are called to be even more important in a city that I believe suffers with spiritual hunger.

Suppose you have a batch of my new clergy cards, suppose you keep them at hand in case you encounter someone who is struggling, suppose you join an Evangelism Committee to work at inviting new people to our congregation. Out in the countryside, you could knock on people’s doors, introduce yourself, and invite your neighbors to church. Here in the city, that is harder to do. It is hard to get by the locked doors, and you do not want to get doormen in trouble by sneaking by them. So, probably you will not be knocking on the doors of your neighbors. Still, if you keep your eyes and your ears open, you might encounter people during the course of the day who could use Christ and his church. They need encouragement, they need comfort, they need a more holy life.

So, let’s imagine that you invite them to church. Now, here comes the soul-searching question: To what, precisely, are you inviting them? Are you inviting them to the Word and Sacraments? Yes, indeed! Are you inviting them to the fellowship of brothers and sisters in the Lord? Yes, indeed! Are you inviting them to moral and spiritual reform? Yes, indeed! But today, at the start of Lent, we can rejoice to also give this answer: You are inviting them to become new. You are inviting them and you are inviting yourself to become new. New people on the face of this earth. A new kind of people. A people who are in Christ. People who have surrendered themselves to Christ and to his ways. People who have permitted their old selves to die, and who now live for Christ – people who are glad to join in the testimony of St. Paul of old:

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live,
but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh
I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave
himself for me. (Galatians 2:20 RSV)

To be on that Evangelism Committee means that we are inviting people into a holy adventure. We are inviting them to not receive the grace of God “in vain,” but rather to become new creatures on the face of this earth – people in whom the very image of Jesus Christ is beginning to shine forth in this world.

Lent is here. Lent is upon us now. May the ashes of this day be for us an invitation for the Holy Spirit of God to flash down from heaven and strike us, making us new, to the benefit of our families, friends, neighbors, and opponents, and to the glory of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.