

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2024
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
The Cross and Love on Earth

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

Last Ash Wednesday, a year ago, while sitting at the Pastor's Booth, I had a nice conversation with a Jewish woman. She said that when she was seven years old, she stood on a street corner with her teacher. She looked up at her teacher, and said, "Miss, you have a smudge on your forehead." The teacher answered, in the formal ways of those days, "My dear, I am a Catholic, and this is Ash Wednesday, and these ashes express my love for Jesus."

By now, the lady at the Pastor's Booth has become elderly. In our conversation last year, she told me that she observed that the number of people with ashes on Ash Wednesday is declining. I answered that I noticed the same thing and that I worry about it. She answered that I should worry. And she added that the Jewish community worries about it too. They worry about the decline of faith on earth.

Today it is Ash Wednesday again. Also it is Valentine's Day. Things just worked out that way. My aim in this sermon is that, as far as lies possible with you and me, we will not let faith decline on earth. We do not want faith to decline because faith in Jesus should lead to love on earth, which is a good theme for Valentine's Day.

In today's Gospel Lesson, Jesus asks us to be careful about practicing our piety before others (Matthew 6). He means our good works, including the giving of alms, fasting, and prayer. But he is preaching against a certain motive — not against the good deeds themselves, but against vainglory. So, for example, when we give to the poor on the street, we should not be aiming for the praise of others, but rather for the praise of God. And so we read this:

²So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.
(Matthew 6:2-4, NRSV)

The same thing applies to paying our taxes fair and square. We should do so not so that we can brag about it to others, but because it is the right thing to

do. To support the commonwealth is a concrete form of love for our neighbors.

Let us note this too: The problem is not the public nature of our good deeds. If we give money or food to a poor woman on the street, for example, that is a public deed. There might well be people who notice what we have done. The problem is not that the money was given in public, but that it was given *for the sake* of being seen. The problem is the motive, not the deed or its public nature.

But this becomes a little complicated. Especially I am thinking of prayer. Jesus says that we should not pray in order to be seen by others. Instead we should go into our room and shut the door and pray in private. But in our day and age, I do recommend praying in public — indeed praying so that we might be seen by others. I am thinking of table grace in the restaurant. We should give thanks before we touch our food whether or not we are seen by others. But if others should see us bow our heads, hold hands, quietly say a prayer of thanksgiving, and then cross ourselves, well, that is okay. That is a good example for the children of our city and for grownups too. So, we do want to be seen, but not for the sake of praise. We are just trying to keep faith alive on earth.

Today's combination of Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day is fascinating to me. It strikes me as a good occasion to lift up the simple idea that sometimes, love requires suffering, and there is nothing to be done but accept the suffering.

The solemn thing about Ash Wednesday is that it begins Lent. It begins that season of the church year when we watch Jesus as he steadily walks on toward Jerusalem and his death. His love for you and me drives him onward. His love will not let him flee from the Cross. In our Confession at the start of the liturgy, we admit that we are unworthy of such love. We admit that in many ways, we have fallen short of Jesus and his manner of life.

And yet we have not fallen short in *all* ways. We too have accepted suffering for the sake of love. I bet you have done that. Many good people in our world have done this, whether or not they are Christians. It is built into the human heart by our Maker. The reality of suffering or the prospect of it should not lead us to flee away from the duties of love.

Because it is Valentine's Day and because it is a romantic thing, think of the marriage vow. In that vow, we promise to be good to one another come what may. We pledge our steadfast love — a love that we mean to maintain even when passions and emotions ebb and flow or when difficulties come along. I love the words of that vow. Listen to it again. I gave this vow to Carol forty-one years ago:

In the name of God, I, Gregory, take you, Carol, to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better

for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health,
to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. This is
my solemn promise.

Carol made the same solemn promise to me, and we have enjoyed living within these vows ever since. For many of our early years, we did not have two nickels to rub together. In these later years, I have had some health problems, including open heart surgery and my fall when I broke both wrists and my right elbow. But Carol has stuck with me and cared for me “for better for worse.” And we mean to do so going forward.

So, that is the marriage vow. But the willingness to care for one another even when the going gets rough is not just part of marriage. It is also a glorious part of much of life here on earth. Love is willing to accept hardships. We see it in young parents working themselves to the bone to try to take care of their children. We see it in friends who grow old together. We see it in soldiers who are willing even to die for one another.

Love says, so what! Love is not intimidated by troubles. Love throws the calculus of self-interest into confusion. Love is willing to go on even when it is not in our self-interest to do so. And I say, let love flourish on earth!

Jesus is our great model here. Horrible suffering lies ahead of him as he journeys to the cross. But along the way, Jesus is a man of kindness and courage and integrity. Indeed, he so loved the world that he was willing to die for us. And in the Holy Communion he makes this personal. As we come forward for the Bread and the Wine, he looks us in the eye and says, “I did this for you. I gave my body and my blood for you!”

In the Eighteenth Chapter of St. Luke, Jesus asks a question that haunts me. The question is at the end of this short passage:

⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?
⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?
(Luke 18:7-8, NRSV)

When Jesus comes again, will he find faith on earth? Let us resolve that the answer shall be, Yes! As far as lies possible with us, we mean for faith to continue on earth. We *need* faith to continue because faith leads on to love, and that is what our old world needs. Jesus makes love rational. Jesus makes it plausible to accept suffering for the sake of love. Jesus did that in his path to Golgotha and he asks us to follow his pattern. And to him be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.