

Ash Wednesday
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Rev. Jason Glombicki
March 1st, 2017

One of the first functions I learned when using a computer was the infamous restart using “Control-Alt-Delete.” Whenever things weren’t going right, “Control-Alt-Delete.” When the computer froze and wouldn’t work, “Control-Alt-Delete.” And when I’d call for help the IT person often would say, “did you try restarting it with... Control-Alt-Delete?”

Today begins the season of Lent with Ash Wednesday. Liturgically speaking, I think that Ash Wednesday is our “Control-Alt-Delete.” Today is a moment that interrupts us in the middle of the week. It’s a time to pause and recall the truth. It has the potential to restart our communal lives together.

In tonight’s gospel reading, we get a glimpse of the “Control-Alt-Delete” function. We heard Jesus say, “Beware of practicing your piety (or justice) before others in order to be seen by them.” (Matthew 6:1) Often we hear the term “piety” in this reading with no mention of “justice” at all. Yet, piety is too narrow a translation and often invokes an individualistic warning. The word in Greek is much broader and includes a sense of societal practices, relationships, and structures. You see, Jesus’s words here are calling us to a spiritual and social reset. Jesus is encouraging us to press “Control-Alt-Delete.” Then, as our communal and personal lives boot back up, we’re encouraged to focus on our motivations.

Ash Wednesday and Lent are about recognizing our motivations. This is a time when we tell the truth about *why* we do what we do. In tonight's reading, Jesus urges us to reflect on these motivations with three different illustrations. First, with almsgiving, then prayer, and finally fasting.

The root of "almsgiving" and how it is practiced comes from another word, "mercy." In Jesus's context, charity was given to the poor in order to enhance the reputation and the honor of the giver. Often the giver would not give with the intent to ensure justice, and it was common that those who gave charity would refuse assistance to the "undeserving" poor and destitute.

Thankfully, we aren't like that in Wicker Park, right? What would Jesus say about us if we were merciful so that we could feel good about ourselves? What would Jesus say to us if we gave to the poor so we could write it off on our taxes or make a good impression? Good thing we don't selectively give to non-profits while ignoring the person begging on the street? Oh, wait... maybe what Jesus spoke over 2,000 years ago still applies to you and to me.

Sure, we can make up every excuse in the book to not be merciful – saying we don't have enough time, or enough money, or we have too much debt, or were not sure how to help. But, in this reading Jesus is talking to the poor. He's encouraging the poor to be merciful by sharing their limited life-sustaining resources. You see, almsgiving is an act of communal solidarity.

Jesus's example about prayer is also about communal solidarity. Prayer is an act of uniting our intentions, our thoughts, and our beliefs with God's message of justice, love of enemies, and peace for all.

And again, Jesus drops the mic while talking about fasting. For fasting highlights our relationships with and use of material resources. Our access to nutritionally-balanced food is a privilege that many across this city, our nation, and our globe do not have.

On this Ash Wednesday, we reject alternative truths and fake news. As Christians, we are about facts. We are about truth. Today we acknowledge that we use gifts of mercy as status symbols instead of truly caring. On this night, we're forced to look into the mirror and remember that we've masked hatred with prayer, instead of working to love those we dislike. Tonight, we are exposed as people who use material resources for our own gain, without care for the environment or others. Today, we recognize our selfish motivations and our alternative truths about others and ourselves.

But there is good news, in a few moments gathered together as a community we will press "Control-Alt-Delete." Today we receive a holy reset to analyze our priorities and begin anew. We're presented with truth when the ash is smeared on our foreheads and we recall our mortality. We also remember that the ash is shaped as a cross, the same shape placed on our head with oil at baptism.

Tonight, we accept the truth that we will die, *and* we acknowledge that we are loved and set free in our baptism. Here, we discover that when ash of our mortality is mixed with waters of a baptism it makes a muddy substance - a substance used by our God to form humankind.

We are certainly both ash and water.

We are both sinner and saint.

We will die and, in that knowledge, we are given life.

Amen.