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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
2/21/2007, Ash Wednesday
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Also, the First of our Lord's Seven Last Words, Luke 23:34

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

In this evening's Gospel Reading from the Sermon on the Mount, Our Lord Jesus says this:

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, NRS)

Observe, please, that Jesus does not forbid the practice of piety, but rather the *glorifying in* piety. He is addressing the heart and the motives of the heart. Nor does he forbid the practice of piety that is open and public and free to be seen by the world. After all, a piety that does not eventually reach the world is a piety that fails to help the world. And so, our Lord does not say, "Beware of practicing your piety *if* others will see your piety," but rather, "Beware of practicing your piety before others *in order to be seen by them.*"

So, when you walk out these church doors after this evening's liturgy, your piety will probably be seen by others, because they will notice the ashy cross on your forehead, but that is fine unless your motives are selfish. I mean, if you wear the ashes in order to brag that you are a pious person, then, as Jesus says, you have your reward. Indeed, you have your reward from the audience you seem to care about: the opinion of your neighbors. But let us try to think of another audience, even the saints and the angels and He who is Lord of all, even God above. Let us practice our piety thinking of heaven and of our God.

The traditional pieties of Lent are repentance, fasting, prayers, and works of love.

This year I want to speak of one of these traditional disciplines, the discipline of fasting. When I was a young preacher, I used to recommend fasting for Lent, but I began to shy away from it when someone reminded me that she was skinny and prone to blood sugar problems and that her doctor did not want her to fast during Lent. Then I felt bad that I had threatened someone's health.

But this year, I find myself drawn to recommend one form of fasting in particular — a fast that each of us is free to do, and one that goes to the heart of our faith. I mean a fast from bitterness and condemnation. I mean the forsaking of a spirit unwilling to forgive. And so I am recommending the piety of charity, for Lent and forever.

My Bible text for this theme is the first of our Lord's Seven Last Words. When the Roman soldiers had pounded the spikes through our Lord's flesh, and wiped the spattered blood from their hands and their arms, then Jesus opened his mouth and spoke, and this is the first thing he said:

Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.(Luke 23:34, KJV)

This cry came from a bound prisoner. Roman soldiers, used to discipline and the ways of securing prisoners: they bound him, they burdened him, they guarded him, they nailed him to the tree. They robbed him of all liberty, but they could not deprive him of this: his life of prayer. There was a holy momentum behind his prayer — years of conversation with his heavenly Father, times apart on lonely mountains, times of intercession for a needy

world. They could deprive Jesus of much, but they could not deprive him of prayer. Even on the cross, he prayed.

And what a prayer! He prayed for those who did not deserve it. He prayed for those who treated him cruelly. No matter, then, what you have done heretofore, nor no matter how low you might have sunk, do not fear that Jesus will not intercede for you. Why, that is what he does, to the end of his life. He prays for forgiveness for those who so terribly need it. He did not even begin his prayer with a cry for his Father's support in his awful time of need. Instead, he rushed to the matter that was first on his mind and always on his mind: Father, forgive them.

Do you want to leave this world with bitterness in your hearts? Our Lord did no such thing. As he was dying, he forgave those who were most immediately hurting him, and through them, he forgave an entire world that rejected him. His enemies were winning, they were triumphing over him, they were driving him from the world, yet he did not depart this world hurling curses at them, but rather praying, Father forgive... What nobility! What sweetness of spirit! Jesus left this world with blessing on his lips.

Note that our Lord's First Word on the Cross goes to the very heart of our Christian faith and of our human need. It is a prayer for forgiveness. Jesus does not contemplate the soldiers and pray for their material welfare, for their food and clothing and shelter, as important as such things are, but rather for their souls. Father, forgive them.

Earlier today we celebrated the noontime Ash Wednesday liturgy. It is a briefer service — one that tries to remain mindful of the press of time for working people on their lunch break. Then, after the liturgy, as I have done in recent years, I went outside and stood of the sidewalk for a while, for the sake of passersby who wanted the ashes. They came in little waves, two or three at a time, sometimes by themselves, like the pizza delivery man, sometimes mothers bringing their children.

Faith! This is what a church is about. It is about the people of the city who know that they "are dust and to dust they shall return," and yet they hope for more. They hope for the life that only our Lord Jesus can give them. They hope for the One who, though we might have made a wreck and ruin of our lives so far, is willing even with his dying breath to pray, "Father, forgive them."

If you are a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, like others on this earth, then you have been hurt. You have been offended, troubled, disappointed, heart-broken, and perhaps even betrayed. Furthermore, as you walk home this evening or back to your place of work tomorrow morning, you will probably be hurt some more, in little ways, by, say, people stepping on your feet on a crowded subway, or in big ways, by a boss or a colleague who will let you down. Such things happen all the time. In fact, if this world's angry glances and vengeful thoughts could be gathered together and projected onto a screen somewhere, I imagine it would be a striking and frightening image to see. In fact, that image would probably burn right on through the screen and bore on out into outer space, such that people on distant planets would shudder at us and wonder whether they ever want to visit us.

But this is Lent. This is a time for a fast from bitterness and from an unwillingness to forgive. This is the time for the *commencing* of something good — even the commencing to walk after the pattern of Jesus and his willingness to forgive.

To this Man of Forgiveness be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.