

Joel 2:1 – 2, 12 – 17

Ash Wednesday, 2021

Psalm 51:1 – 17

2 Cor. 5:20b – 6:10

Matthew 6:1 – 6, 16 – 21

The 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation took place almost 3 ½ years ago. We marked the anniversary year through several celebrations and remembrances. In our Parish, we now remember that year for another reason now, it is the year we opened Katie's Pantry! During VBS that summer, our youth were visited each night by "Katie Luther" who regaled them with stories of how Katie took care of and fed her household that often number 50+. She raised food, tended gardens and fishponds, and squirreled away any money Martin Luther brought home because he often gave it away as quickly as he received it.

Katie Luther's story of feeding and caring for her own family, plus various students, family members and others who came by inspired us to think about the ways we were helping people in need in our own community. We decided that most of the help was good, but not local enough, and not direct enough. Without much forethought or planning, we built a food pantry in the parking lot of Grace Lutheran. Katie's Free Pantry stands there now, stocked at least once a day by member of the church and often by folks in the community as well. During the pandemic, we have been stocking it at least twice a day, asking people to take what they need and give what they can. As economic disparities and food insecurities rise, we hope our little attempt to right some of these wrongs is helping those most vulnerable in some way.

Jesus stepped into an interesting time in the history of the Roman Empire, and in the life of those who lived in and around Jerusalem and Judea. Throughout much of Matthew's gospel, Jesus is pictured as a great healer and restorer who responds to the intense sickness and poverty of the people he encounters on a daily basis. Jesus responds to the people who follow him because they are the victims of severe economic, political, and theological exploitation.

In Roman times, about 2% of the population had the wealth and power while the rest were oppressed politically, theologically, and militarily. Historians suggest that it is likely that at least 10% of the poor were always on the edge of economic

despair. These were the beggars, the people who are chronically sick, the people with physical handicaps, and those labeled as criminals. The peace of Rome, known as pax Romana, was only for the few while the rest suffered or kept things in line for those who had power.

When Jesus steps onto the Mount to deliver his sermon, it is no wonder that he begins by blessing the people who are hurting, barely subsiding, and living under the difficult realm and rule of the Roman oppressors. Following the blessing he pronounces in the first verses of the sermon, Jesus continues in our lesson for this Ash Wednesday by teaching that the foundation of healing and wholeness in body, mind and spirit is found in giving, praying, and discerning what is basic and beneficial for our lives.

In the midst of this passage, Jesus wisely counsels us and encourages us to put some distance between our faith practices and our awareness of them. Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Go into your room and pray quietly to the God who will hear you. And finally, do not look like the hypocrites for they love to stand at the street corners and proclaim all that they are doing.

Because we are set free to live in this way, Jesus calls us, challenges us, and begs us to live as the baptized people and children of God who live for love of God and neighbor. These three disciplines of Lent are actually life-long calls to live in this way. To give for the well-being of others; to intensify our prayers for the world; and to determine those aspects of our lives that would benefit from self-denial.

Therefore, we are set free indeed. One of the stark reminders that Ash Wednesday sets before us is the fact that none of us are getting out of this world alive. We are all sin-filled human beings who are dust, and we will return to dust. The ashes on our foreheads, literally or figuratively this year, remind us of this truth even as they make the form of the cross on our foreheads. We are children and people of God who have been baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection. The cross stands boldly on our foreheads this night, but it is always there, marking, claiming, and challenging us to be the people God in Christ has called us to be.

This Lenten season, may we all receive that swift kick in the butt from the Holy Spirit that we all need to make our lives a lot more about others and a little less about us.

- May we pray boldly for this world and the injustices we see all around us. May we lift up the lowly, the dispirited, the poor, and the hungry and feed them, not only with our prayers, but with our hands reaching out with food as well.
- May we give from our abundance as we have been abundantly given to. Many of us have probably found ourselves only slightly affected by the financial crunch this pandemic has created for so many. Our gifts of time, talent, and treasure are needed as much if not more than ever before.
- May we take a hard look at our lives, how they have changed over much of the past year and determine how we will live moving forward. There are probably some things we cannot wait to do again, and there are other things that no longer need to be a part of our busy lives. Where will we benefit from some self-denial and decluttering of our lives?

As the called and baptized, marked, and sent people of God, we are called to enter this Lenten season with open hearts, minds, and spirits as we journey with Jesus to the cross and to the empty tomb. As we give thanks for the gifts God has given to us, may we find ways, through prayer, giving, and fasting, to continue to give back to God. As we live into the promises, we remember that we are dust, baptized and forgiven dust, set free to live in this world, seeking to love God and neighbor, as people who give what we can so others may have what they need! This is the world Jesus envisions on the Sermon on the Mount and as we see this unfold in our lives and communities, we receive a glimpse and a foretaste of the kingdom of God, where are our and treasure reside. Amen.