

MESSAGE FOR LENTEN 4

March 22, 2009 – Pastor Frederickson

LESSONS: Numbers 21: 4-9, Ephesians 2: 1-10, John 3: 14-21

Introduction

The other day I was asked about the practice of fasting. You know, the act of denying yourself food, not as portion control to avoid obesity, but as like a spiritual exercise. Fasting is very common in many of the world's great religions, such as Ramadan for the Muslims, a whole month of fasting, or not eating meat, but fish, during Lent, or on Fridays. So, the question I was asked was, 'Why don't we do it, and ... why don't we fast?' Well, if fasting brings you closer to Christ because it removes a distraction from your life, such as a Culver's butter burger. Go for it – fast away.

But, if fasting, yourself denial, actually brings more attention to you and your devotion, your sacrifice, your self generated holiness, then whom are you focusing on? = me, myself and I, the middle letter of sin. Jesus had something to say about fasting in His Sermon on the Mount, **Matthew 6 'When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting ... but when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious that you are fasting ... and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you'**. Our Lutheran Catechism also confesses about preparation for receiving Holy Communion saying **'fasting and other outward preparations may serve a good purpose, but he is properly prepared who believes these words 'Given' and 'poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins'. But whoever does not believe these words or doubts them is not prepared, because the words 'for you' require nothing but hearts that believe'**.

So fast if you want to. It's OK. As for me, I am going to have my Culver's Butter Burger and invite you 'by God's grace through faith as a gift, not by our works'

'TO FIX OUR EYES ON JESUS, THE FOUNDER AND PERFECTER OF OUR FAITH!

And that is what I want to talk to you about a little bit today, primarily based upon our Epistle lesson, Eph. 2: **YOU ARE WANTED DEAD AND ALIVE!**

I.

When we meditate upon the cross we usually consider Jesus' death upon that cross. But, with eyes of faith look with me a little closer through Jesus' crucified and bloodied body and we will see ourselves crucified there.

Eph. 2 our text says 'you were dead in your trespasses and sins'. And when it says dead it means dead, not just wounded, not just hindered, not set back a little bit, but dead. And not only spiritually dead in the sense that we are lost and without God, but we are as good as dead by nature. It's

an oxymoron, really. We're the living dead. Actually, we're the dying dead. We are God's wrath and punishment just waiting to happen.

Eph. 2 our text says 'by nature we are children of wrath ... following the course of the world, following the prince of power', the devil. We are all the kinds of death you can think of, physically dead, spiritually dead, temporally dead, eternally dead. By nature we're the walking dead, which by definition is a zombie.

All of us love people who have died. At funerals, the deceased is referred to as our 'loved one'. And we continue to love our Mom or Dad or wife or husband or grandparents or child or friend who has died, don't we? Especially we Christians who have every reason to continue to love our dear ones, who are still very much alive in Christ and waiting for us in heaven, with the angels and archangels as all the company of heaven.

But, how could we love someone who's never been alive? Wrap your little brain around that concept. How can we love someone you've never felt the touch of, someone you've never had their little fingers wrap around yours, someone you never laughed with on a date, someone you've never had to make a difficult decision with, Because, he or she was never alive. How could you love him or her? How could you love someone who has never, ever been anything more than a cold corpse, never smiled at you, never had a thought about you, never had a moment of life even to lose. How could you love someone who's never been alive? That's some food for thought!

Well, that's precisely the way God loves all of us. When Paul says we were all dead in our trespasses and sins, it's not as if we were alive and then died. We were never alive, a human body and soul yes, but toward God always dead, physically and spiritually. There is nothing in us and never has been anything in us for God to love. And yet He does love us.

So, God made the move. Jesus, God the Son, in God's mercy upon us dead sinners, Jesus came and got dead with us. God incarnate, God in flesh and blood got down and dirty and dead with us. I suppose you could say Jesus is like our hero who enters a burning building, risking everything to get everyone out, but that's really not the case. For Jesus as God incarnate, there was no risk, because there was absolutely no way He could get out alive once He was conceived in the Virgin Mary's womb He was destined to die for us. God would have to die to get you out of your dieing death. It was a cold and calculating decision of God's mercy, but He made it entirely and only because God loves you.

John 3 'God did not send His Son, Jesus, into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him'.

Jesus, is more like a mole, you know one of those ugly little vermin that mole through the dirt, than like a hero. Crucified on that cross in our place, buried in that grave in our place, God in Jesus Christ

ugly with blood and spit and nails and thorns and lacerated body, infiltrated Himself into death and the grave and ambushed death and the grave with His mercy. Jesus got all the dying done for you and your loved ones, who are more alive right now than we are. We are still in that process of living to die, dieing to live!

Eph. 2 ‘even when we were dead in our trespasses ... God made us alive together with Christ’.

II.

But, if we and our loved ones still die, why did Jesus die? Look deeper, look deeper than the physical death of Jesus’ corpse upon that cross, look deeper than your loved ones or your own physical death in a coffin and a grave. Jesus became death itself, Jesus went past just the surface of death, Jesus got deader than death, so to speak. Jesus, moled Himself right into the very cause of death and Jesus annihilated it. Jesus cursed it, so you and I and our loved ones would not be cursed forever in hell by the wrath of God. So, now we the ‘dieing dead’ in dieing are ‘alive together in Christ’. Just like there is much more to Jesus death upon the cross than simply a dead corpse = it’s actually our death on that cross. So also, with Jesus’ resurrection, it’s not only Jesus raised from the grave but us also raised, we are our resurrection people. Our resurrection is not some kind of fringe benefit of God’s grace and mercy. Our resurrection and life everlasting was Jesus entire goal = achieved for us and given to us by the grace of God.

Romans 6 ‘Do you not know all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were therefore buried with Jesus through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with Jesus in His death, we will certainly also be united with Him in His resurrection ... count yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus’.

Eph. 2 ‘God ... raised us up with Jesus and seated us with Jesus in the heavenly places’. Crucified with Christ, raised with Christ ‘by grace through faith as a gift’ our entire perspective has been changed, converted, repented about death and dieing and about life and living. Jesus not only presented Himself before God the Father when He ‘finished’ our eternal salvation. He has presented you in God’s sight =finished, forgiven, loved, alive in Christ!

Jesus knew who He was dieing and rising for through that cross and grave = deader than dead mud balls = us. Who having been made ‘alive with Christ’ need constant reminding and encouragement of not our sacrifice, not our devotion, not our self denial, not our holiness, those are all dead works in God’s sight, those are all darkness. But, it’s Jesus’ sacrifice, it’s Jesus’ devotion, it’s Jesus’ self denial, it’s Jesus

holiness for us, dead sinners, which is the light that has come into the world. **We ‘fix our eyes upon Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith’.**

Conclusion

Faith in God’s Word is not a challenge for you to live up to. Faith in God’s Word is not a challenge for you to muster in order to achieve God’s mercy, grace and favor. But, faith in the promises of God’s Word is a gift simply received. It’s yours, as a baptized child of God in communion with Jesus. So, you can fast if you like this Lenten season, or any other time of the year. Every Friday you can go without meat and eat fish. You can even fast a whole month, like in Ramadan. It’s OK. If fasting helps you get rid of a distraction in your life, and it helps you focus more upon Jesus and less upon yourself, go for it – it’s entirely between you and God, and no one else, ‘for God sees what is done in secret and He will reward you.’ As for me, I’m going to more than likely eat my Culver’s Butter Burger, though, I will watch my portions to control obesity. But, I will eat my Butter Burger with thanksgiving for God’s grace and mercy upon us, the dieing dead, who for Jesus’ sake has made us alive in Christ – now and eternally. As our Catechism confesses and I believe **‘Fasting and other outward preparations may serve a good purpose, but he is properly prepared who believes these words ‘given’ and ‘poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins’ ... because the words ‘for you’ require nothing but hearts that believe’.**

YOU ARE WANTED DEAD IN YOUR SINS AND ALIVE IN CHRIST!

Amen.