

“Sinful Dust”
Luke 23:34

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Ash Wednesday...In many churches around the world it is unfortunately often overlooked, minimized, or even forgotten altogether. It marks the beginning of the Lenten season, and for us today it begins a journey through our Lord's Passion, as we discuss over the coming weeks what are commonly referred to as "The Seven Words of Jesus from the Cross." The first word of Jesus comes to us from Luke 23:34, where Jesus says, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And as we begin this discussion, it is fitting that it begins on the day where we bring the reality of our total depravity (that is, our original sin that has been inherited from Adam) to the forefront of our minds. Sin is always active in our lives, whether we experience it directly as we daily battle our Old Adam, or indirectly as we see its effect on this fallen world. Today, we have proclaimed that each one of us is dust, and to dust we shall return. The mark of these ashes upon our heads is not one of pious grandstanding and showy Christian chicanery, but one of humble repentance and acknowledgement that we need the forgiveness which Christ has won for us on the cross, because as we walk in this lost world, we are nothing but "sinful dust."

As in all things related to God's Word, we must discuss both Law and Gospel. God's Law is a protector, a guard for the *protevangelium*, the first Gospel promise of the seed of the woman, who is Christ. And that guard is posted for the benefit of God's people, for us, to keep us strong in the faith that we would not fall into the traps of the evil one who constantly works to pull us away from our Lord and bury us in eternal death. This protection of the Law is not what saves us though. It is what the Holy Spirit works in us to keep us on the path of salvation which Jesus has paved by the shedding of His blood and the tearing of His flesh upon the cross. That is where we place our faith.

We try and try to keep God's holy Law, and we continually fail and fail in this futile effort. Not that it is an unworthy effort, though, so we must be careful not to slip into antinomianism. God's Law is perfect, and as such we cannot keep it because we are imperfect beings. Because of the sin of Adam, we have lost all inherent righteousness that is needed to keep the Law perfectly. Jesus is and will always be the only man among fallen humanity that can keep the perfect Law of God perfectly. As the holy Son of God, He took on flesh, to bear our sin, and be our Savior, and to fulfill the Law by keeping it

perfectly. Those who foolishly believe that they have that same power of perfection have abandoned the truths and teachings of Scripture.

We cannot become like those whom Paul warns Timothy of in 2 Timothy 4:3, which says, “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions.” If we lose sight of that which has saved us, we run the risk of drifting into false doctrine, which the devil uses to corrupt your faith, and make you even worse than those for whom Jesus pleads to the Father for forgiveness. False doctrine is abounding in the world today, and by design from the evil one it appears good and enticing, drawing people into its snares and trapping them outside of the truth of God’s Word. As those who have been saved by the grace of God in Christ Jesus alone, we must resist and battle this ideology that all doctrine is good doctrine if it comes from “the church.”

Because if you fail to be one who “knows not what they do,” and drift into willful and knowledgeable sin, you become the devil’s workmanship, and not the workmanship of Christ, which Paul proclaims us to be in Ephesians 2:10. You run the risk of falling prey to the sin against the Holy Spirit, that sin which cannot be forgiven, for it is a denial of God and His righteous power to save. But that does not mean that having questions about certain doctrines or slipping into or stumbling upon, and maybe even momentarily buying into, false doctrines makes you an unforgivable sinner. Those are the actions of one who “knows not what they do.” We are called to follow God’s Law and follow Jesus who is the very Son of God. When we do that, we are abiding in His love, which is His forgiveness that He proclaims to us on the cross.

Jesus’ beseeching of forgiveness for his murderers is critical to our understanding of what it is that He is doing in allowing this suffering to be heaped upon Him. He is not doing it for Himself, or for His own glory. That glory is His already as God of very God. He is doing it for us. He is subjecting Himself the most heinous of punishments in the ancient world for the benefit of our everlasting souls, and no other reason. In the midst of what had to be great cries of pain, He focuses on you, and only you. Each one of you is called to be forgiven according to the sacrifice which Christ has made because that is what He has done. He has ransomed you, purchased you back from the power of sin and the devil, to make you His own and to keep you by His grace in the faith which has saved you.

Jesus begs the Father to forgive those who have placed Him upon that cross, those who by the inherited original sin of Adam have made it necessary for Him to die a death He does not deserve. Jesus Himself knows the necessity of His death, though in His humanity would rather not have to do it. He prays in the garden on the evening of His arrest, as Luke records it in 22:42, “Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but Yours, be done.” This is not a request for the Father to abandon His plan, but the pain and suffering our Lord must endure is consistent with the crimes which He will be taking on Himself. He is dying a death that should be ours, and not just ours, but every human being who has ever lived, going all the way back to Adam, and every other that has yet to come into existence.

The Lord’s cry of forgiveness is not because what these men are doing to Him is not sinful, but because it is not the nails and hammers of these men that are placing him upon that cross. It is every sin of every man, woman, and child, in all times and in all places, that has placed Him upon that bloody tree. It is our sins, each and every one of them that He has taken upon Himself, willingly, so that we might receive the benefit of His perfect righteousness when we stand before the righteous judge on the last day. As we reflect on our sinful nature which seeks to corrupt us unceasingly everyday of our lives, that is why we take this time to draw a simple cross on our foreheads with the palm ashes of our Lord’s triumphal entry from the year prior. Because that ash, that dust, is where we would stay if it were not for the love of Jesus which has been put on full display in his act of mercy on Calvary. And that simple cross is nothing simple at all. It is nothing less than the sign of our eternal salvation, that which will keep us in God’s loving grace for the rest of our lives, and the eternal beatific vision that awaits us in the eschaton.

It is appropriate that as we begin this relationship as pastor and flock, it is being done in this season of repentance. Though it is not the usual timing, it highlights for us the truth of God’s work in our lives to bring us the forgiveness which Jesus brings to us as our eternal mediator and high priest. He has placed me here, to be His undershepherd. To guard and protect His sheep by calling you to repentance as the sinners that you are, self included, and to proclaim His forgiveness which He intercedes for on your behalf. It is the Father’s forgiveness that I proclaimed to you a few moments ago, and it is only because of Jesus’ constant intercession and beseeching of the Father that forgiveness belongs to you. On this Ash Wednesday, as we look to the cross and the forgiveness which the Holy Spirit brings to us on account of Jesus’ all atoning sacrifice, remember that you are naught but “sinful dust” in need of a loving Savior. And as baptized children

of God, who have been called by the Gospel, slayed by the Law, and redeemed in Christ alone, walk humbly in repentance, as Christ bids you to do. Jesus proclaimed to his captors, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Never forget, that as one who is always subject to the temptations of this world, that by the blood of Jesus, you too have been forgiven for all of your sins which placed him there. Our Catechism reading today was all about the reality of our sin, and the truth of our hope of salvation, and that hope lies only in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.