

**Readings:** Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Grace to you and peace from the God who was, who is, and who is to come. Amen.

[*Taking trumpet out of case...*] “*Blow the trumpet!*” announces the prophet Joel in our first reading. Trumpets announce important things. They warn, they let people know that something is about to happen or that it’s happening now... A trumpet declares a battle is about to start; taps is played to proclaim a loved one has died and it’s time to grieve; or a trumpet announces something new is coming – we’re entering a new season or that a new time is at hand.

What do all these things have in common? Well, as a trumpet player in high school, I can tell you that it never failed to make me at least a little bit uncomfortable when I played the trumpet. You can’t really hide behind anything when you’re playing a trumpet.

So I wonder if one common note that all trumpet-announced things have in common is that they announce things about to happen or happening now – *and that these things will probably make us uncomfortable.*

“Blow the trumpet” says the prophet Joel. Well, I haven’t really played much since high school, but here goes... [*blowing trumpet...*] You know, it sounds about like I’ve felt the last couple days – kind of stuffed up.

Maybe we should have blown a trumpet just before worship tonight, to let you know that when you came into the sanctuary you might be a little uncomfortable. Warn you that the usual pew where you sit might not be there. It’s interesting, sometimes we don’t even know we have a usual place to sit until things are moved around.

But not only that, maybe we should have blown a trumpet just before worship tonight, to let you know that you were going to get an uncomfortable reminder. A reminder that has nothing to do with moving furniture around, but has everything to do with the uncomfortable nature of our lives.

*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.* It’s a reminder for each of us individually this Ash Wednesday, but as we look

around tonight (and we can't help but see more of the faces of this worshipping community tonight), as we look around tonight – cross ashes on foreheads are not only an uncomfortable reminder of our own all-too-short lives, but of the all-too short lives of our neighbors and loved ones also.

Maybe we should have blown a trumpet before worship tonight. But then, Jesus tells us in our Gospel reading for this day, “*don't* sound a trumpet before you...” So what's going on with these readings that seem to disagree?

Well, I'll tell you one thing, growing up and coming from a Midwestern-farm-culture as I have and maybe some of you have (where we tell jokes like the one about the man who loved his wife so much that he almost told her...), I can't help but feel a little more comfortable with Jesus' suggestions.

When you give alms, don't sound a trumpet. When you pray, try not to be seen by others. When you fast, don't show off.

It's all about *reward*, Jesus says. Don't practice your religion, don't practice your faith so others can reward you. Actually come to think of it, Jesus seems to say practicing your faith has NOTHING to do with reward, it has to do with where your heart is. Because where you look for your reward, where you store up treasure, there your heart will be also.

And so, we gather together tonight this Ash Wednesday and what's the first thing we do? We disfigure our faces marking them with a cross of ash. And then we blow a trumpet as stuffed up as it sounds. And later we'll pray for all to hear. We're a funny bunch, we Christians, aren't we?

I'll admit, this teaching of Jesus makes me more comfortable, being from a Midwestern-farm-culture where just about the worst thing to do is to draw attention to yourself. But often when I'm comfortable, I get a gnawing in my stomach like hunger that it's not what Jesus was getting at. And I've got a hunch that it's not what the prophet Joel was getting at either.

So what is the point? What's the point of our readings tonight? What's the point of Ash Wednesday? What's the point of this 40 day season we call Lent that we enter into right now? What's the point of blowing the trumpet or not blowing the trumpet? What's the point of drawing attention or not drawing attention to ourselves? What is the point of it all, indeed.

“Well, for starters,” Jesus says, “Watch how you practice your religion, watch how you live out your faith.” Think about what you do, because what you do affects what you believe. Usually we think it works the other way around don’t we? But it’s not a question of *if you will practice religion* or *if you will out your faith* because whether you like it or not, everybody’s got a religion, everybody’s got their own god they worship.

You know, it might seem odd, but some of the best conversations I’ve had have been with people who say they don’t believe in God. And it’s because often they say something like, “A god who endorses wars and suffering, a god who sits idly by while the comfortable get more comfortable and the uncomfortable get more uncomfortable, well that’s not a god I believe in.” And more often than not, I find myself agreeing with them, “You know, that’s not the God I believe in either.”

Watch how you practice your religion, Jesus says. Keep a close eye on your own hypocrisy, don’t worry about the hypocrisy of your neighbor.

So whenever you give alms... And whenever you pray... And whenever you fast... Jesus begins these three parts of the Gospel reading with “whenever.” Because it’s not a question of *if*, it’s a question of *how*.

We all give, don’t we. We all give money, most often we give it in exchange for groceries or electricity, even the gifts we give often have a subtle, self-serving motive (tax-deduction notwithstanding). The question is will we *give alms*. Will we give without expecting the exchange of service, simply because we’ve been given the great gift – we’ve been created in the image of God, given the breath of life. And there’s no way we can earn or repay that or the gift that is its partner and twin – forgiveness, salvation.

And we all pray, don’t we. We all have thoughts, wants, needs, desires, hopes, dreams, expectations. The question is will we communicate our deepest thoughts, wants, needs, desires, hopes, dreams, and expectations to those who can’t fulfill them? Will we try to fulfill our need for intimacy (which is really at the heart of prayer, isn’t it?), will we try to fill our hunger in unhealthy ways? Or will we strive, will we work to turn around our deepest needs (will we be converted) by what I think is the hardest line to pray authentically in the whole Lord’s Prayer– *Your kingdom come, your will be done*. Your will be done.

And we all fast, don’t we. There are things we do and things we don’t do, it’s the nature of being human – we can’t do it all. But sometimes we

fast from the good stuff – from healthy food, from speaking well of our neighbor – we could start by fasting from the things that *don't give us life*.

I heard an interesting word about fasting the other day. “The church tells us to fast,” someone observed, “and we say, ‘I’m not gonna do that, they can’t make me.’ But our doctor tells us, ‘Don’t have anything to eat or drink before the test.’ What do we do? Exactly what the doctor tells us.” Because we know it’s important for life.

But that’s the whole point of fasting. That’s the whole point of practicing our faith.

The point of fasting is to notice our hunger, to notice the gnawing in our stomachs for right relationships with God, with one another, with ourselves. And to connect the hungers we see and hear around us and notice what we need and what we don’t actually need to live... to notice what gives life... to notice where our life ultimately comes from and where it is going.

These Wednesday nights throughout Lent we will explore the senses – sight, sound, touch, taste, smell – and how we experience God through these senses. Tonight I declare a fast at Custer Lutheran Fellowship. Don’t worry, I’m not going to blow the trumpet again, I’ll spare you.

But it is an invitation over these 40 days ahead to think about how you might fast. Not just to stop drinking coffee or eating chocolate, but to really think about the hungers with which you have grown out of touch. Think about the things that give you life with which you have lost a sense of connection.

And I’ll *warn you*, you just might find like many times when we practice our faith, the opposite of what we think will happen, happens... You might find that in the fast; you are filled. You might find that when you give; you receive twice as much. You might find that in the course of praying for something else to be changed; you are the thing changed. You might find, as we often do as the funny bunch of Christians that we are, that in dying to yourself and to the world around you; you really start to live.

Thanks be to God for the gift of reminders. Thanks be to God who says to us tonight and always, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning... Return to me, your God, for I am gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” Let us proclaim, announce, and declare with trumpets, with ash, with words and with silence this good news. Amen.