

21 February 2007  
Ash Wednesday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“Self-righteous or Christ-righteous?”

Text: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 (Joel 2:12-19; 2 Cor 5:20b-6:10)

*“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”*

It is not bad being righteous. It is bad being righteous for the wrong reasons. In fact, if we think we are being righteous or trying to be righteous but for the wrong reasons, then really and truly we are not righteous at all, but *self-righteous*. And self-righteousness is, at its heart, selfishness and pride and sin of the worst kind. Concerned only with others insofar as they can advance my own righteousness and standing, before others and before God. As we heard from St. Matthew, the giving of alms, prayers, fasting, and whatever else we do in this way has no regard from God at all. The praise for your piety and the pats on the back are all the reward you will receive.

**And of this we are all guilty.** And if you think that statement too strong, or think it not true, and want to protest it and proclaim your innocence – *is that not proving the point?* For is it not self-righteousness that admits no fault, no wrong? Self-righteousness that wants others to know my motives are pure? Self-righteousness that wants others to think me righteous, and pure, and holy, and good? Self-righteousness that seeks the praise of others?

Tonight, Jesus says, beware of this. Because it is in you. It is in all men and women since the days of Adam.

Tonight, Jesus says, beware . . . *and repent*. Offer no pious explanations, excuses, self-justifications, or extenuating circumstances. Offer no good works or pious activities to balance your fault and guilt. Come before God empty-handed, as in the days of the prophet Joel, when they had nothing to offer God; no grain and no wine to offer Him as a sacrifice. Come in the repentance that rends the heart and implores: “God

*be merciful to me, the sinner.” (Lk 18:13)*

**For this is what God desires most of all, for this is the road to righteousness.**

Righteousness not of the “self” variety, but of the “Christ” variety. That comes with nothing – no godliness, no holiness, no righteousness to offer God; but that comes so that Christ make us godly with *His* godliness, holy with *His* holiness, and righteous with *His* righteousness. That it be as we heard earlier from St. Paul: “*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*” Righteous, in Him. That’s righteousness of the *Christ* variety. Or to put what Paul said in other words: *He [Jesus] became the sin that we are, that we might become the righteousness He is.*

And that is the call that goes out to us this night. Not *just* this night, but *especially* this night. “*Return to the Lord your God.*” Why? “*For He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.*” For He has not only promised His righteousness in the forgiveness of our sins, **but has done it.** *Signed, sealed, and delivered.* Signed in His Word, sealed by Jesus’ blood shed on the cross, and delivered now through His means of grace, His Word and Sacraments. That it may be yours. That you be not self-righteous, but Christ-righteous.

And so He bids us come. Come, return, repent, and receive the forgiveness and righteousness He has for you. The forgiveness and righteousness He won for you in His death and resurrection. The forgiveness and righteousness that makes you godly, holy, and His!

*So why don’t we?* Oh, certainly, tonight we are! But is this the exception or the rule? What keeps us from repentance at other times? Is it the joys of our sin? (Because we really don’t want to stop and change our ways!) Maybe. Is it the shame of our sin? (Thinking we’re too far gone and it’s just gonna be too hard!) That’s another possibility. Or is it the busy-ness of life? (And so we never seem to get around to it.) Or is it that old self-righteousness welling up inside of us, that dulls and blunts our hearts and minds so that we do not feel the need? That makes us think we’re not so bad. Just keep pluggin’, keep tryin’, keep improving . . .

Maybe it’s all of the above, as Satan pulls our strings, blinds our eyes, and strokes our egos. Beware . . .

So tonight, the call goes out. And we return. “*With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend[ing] our hearts and not our garments.*” And pray that this become a *habitus*, a habit, with us. God working in our hearts by grace through faith to keep us strong **in Him**.

And so we return, not to give; but in repentance, to receive. To receive the promises of God. First, **in the Gospel**, and we received the wonderful words of the Absolution: *I forgive you all your sins*. And soon **at the Altar**, to receive His testament; to eat and drink the body and blood of the One who became sin for us, that we may become as He is. And then later tonight, return **to your baptism**, when you go home and wash those ashes off your forehead. As you do, remember the holy cross that was first traced on that very same spot, by water and the Word, in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. When you were born again from above. When you received the gifts of faith and sonship. When you were given the promise of eternal life – that *ashes to ashes, and dust to dust* would no longer be your end! But resurrection to everlasting life in the One who came and died and rose for you.

And then – then having *received* such righteousness and godliness, you *then* can practice it. Not to be seen by others, and not for God, but as it is – as gift. For those are the good works well-pleasing to your Father in Heaven. Those born of faith and forgiveness. Those done not in self-righteousness but in Christ-righteousness. Those done as gift from gift. Those done not to receive anything in return, because we have already received the kingdom! What is now left, is Christ-likeness. To be the son you are. Until the final Easter, when in Christ, all dust and ashes are no more!

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