

Jesu Juva

“ ‘X’ Marks the Spot”

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

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let's be honest. For most, or all of us, our problem isn't that we give to the needy in order to be seen and praised, or pray on the street corners in order to be seen, or fast in order to be seen. For most, or all of us, our problem is that we don't do these things *at all*. Or at least, we don't do them enough.

I haven't met a Christian yet who thinks their prayer life is where it should be. And they're probably right. How many times do we walk by people in need and not only not help them but think ill of them, that they are scammers, or lazy, or just out to get some free cash. And fasting? Far more likely is that our bodily urges master us rather than we master them. Whether that urge be for food or sex or anger or sleep or anything else.

And those are just three examples. Open up the secret places of your heart and what will you find there? A heart that fears, loves, and trusts in God above all things? That treasures God's Name and Word above all else? That honors and obeys father and mother and respects our earthly authorities? That does not hurt others, but helps them in every physical need? That is sexually pure? That is generous and truthful and content with what you have? That thinks of others and not yourself? That's not your heart at all, is it? Mine either. And if your Father who sees in secret will reward you, what do you think you deserve for all that?

Well, “x” marks the spot. You've been marked . . . even if you didn't receive ashes tonight. You're the sinner. *Dust you are and to dust you shall return*. And the wages of sin is death.

So the prophet Joel was right - rend your hearts and not your garments. Throw open the doors of your heart wherein hides all that sin, all that junk, all that impurity, and repent. ***Return to the Lord, your God. Why? For he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.***

Think about those attributes for a moment before we move on. We shouldn't skip over them too quickly and not be amazed by them. For these things are not just who God is for those who are good; this is who God is **for you**, and for all people. For there is *no one who is good; no, not one* (Romans 3:10). But God . . . He is **gracious**. He gives us what we do not deserve: life and breath and all we need to support this body and life, and blessings on top of that. He is **merciful**. He does not give us what we *do* deserve: He does not withdraw His love and care from us and let us go our own way, but disciplines us and helps us, oftentimes in ways of which we are not even aware. He is **slow to anger**. Patient. Or as the Scriptures often say, *longsuffering*. He does not strike out at us or snap at us as we so often do to others who wrong us, or who we perceive have wronged us. He wants no sinner to perish. He wants all to return to Him. For He is **abounding in**

steadfast love. A love that does not wax and wane, but is steadfast and reliable. A love that loves not just a little, but is *abounding*.

Unbelievably, that is the God we have rebelled against and turned away from with our sinful lives, thinking we know better, thinking we can do better. For that's what sin really is: thinking that God's way is not good, is not right, is not best, and that we know and can do better. That's what the sin in us thinks. But what a mess we have made.

But this wonderful God that we have rebelled against and turned away from *is also the God who calls us back*. Who calls and calls and preaches and preaches with a voice and a plea that will not be silent until the Last Day, when He comes again to issue His righteous and final judgment.

But that day is not yet. And that's good news. And so, St. Paul said, ***God is continuing to make His appeal through us. Be reconciled to God. Now is the favorable time; now is the day of salvation.*** Now.

And once again, "x" marks the spot. For the "x" on our foreheads marking us sinners is not just any "x" - **it is in the shape of a cross.** And the cross is what makes all the difference. For there on the cross is your reconciliation with God. There on the cross is your salvation. There, "x" marks the spot where Jesus, *who knew no sin, was made to be sin* - was made to be our sin offering - *so that you who had no righteousness, might become the righteousness of God.* There on the cross is where Jesus shows you the grace, mercy, and steadfast love of God, who would do that for you. *For you!* To save you. To rescue you. To give you life and hope and a future.

And so we turn back now not with Joel's hopeful - but uncertain - *who knows? Who knows whether God will turn back to us, if He will relent, if He will end the disaster that has visited us.* That's not us because the cross shows us HE HAS. God has turned to us in Jesus. Jesus bore the disaster of sin, it's horror, it's shame. He put it all on Himself that it be no longer on you. And because He did, we return tonight in confidence, not fear. We return tonight in sorrow, and receive His forgiveness. For this He has promised to give. A promise Jesus sealed with His own blood.

And a promise sealed for you when Jesus first put the sign of the cross upon you - not with ashes, but with water: the water of your baptism. The water of baptism that washes away the guilt of your sin and marks you as a child of your heavenly Father.

So returning tonight we are saying yes to that promise of sonship and forgiveness. Yes, Father, you have made me your son through the death and resurrection of *Your* Son, though I have not lived like it and have failed in so many ways and at so many times. Forgive me. Raise me. Heal me. That my treasure be no longer here on earth ***where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal***, but that my treasure be You. And ***where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.***

So tonight is a night of returning, which means *to go back to someplace you've been before.* So return to the Lord Your God. And how do you do that? By returning to your baptism where He makes You His own. By returning to His absolution where He forgives Your sin. By returning to

receive His Body and Blood where He feeds you with Himself, giving Himself to you completely.

And then when you return to your home tonight and wash that cross off your forehead, say a prayer of thanksgiving as you do. For the life you have been given. For the life He keeps on giving you. And for the eternal life that you will one day be given.

O Holy Spirit, Grant Us Grace (LSB #693) - so to believe, and so to live.

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