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Ash Wednesday (transferred)

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Powerful Sin, Powerful Blood!”

Text: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21; 2 Cor 5:20b-6:2

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

You are probably familiar with the saying, “*Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.*” Tonight, I would like to put a little different spin on that, and tell you that also, “*Dirty is in the eye of the beholder.*” And this I know to be true from my own experience. I know it from my days as a bachelor living in my own apartment. I would walk into my apartment and think that its pretty clean, while my mother would walk in and find it to be, well . . . not so clean! “*Dirty is in the eye of the beholder.*” I also know it now as a parent, with my children’s rooms and our differing opinions on whether they are clean or not; and also from looking at hands before we eat dinner, and whether they need washing or not. Its amazing how hands can look so clean from one perspective, and so dirty from another! “*Dirty is in the eye of the beholder.*”

Now on this Ash Wednesday, those silly examples carry an important message for us. For when it comes to our lives and our sin, it is also true that “*Dirty is in the eye of the beholder.*” In our world today, a life that one person thinks is dirty and sinful, another person does not. One person might consider themselves pretty good and clean, while another person may look at them and see nothing but filth and sin. “*Dirty is in the eye of the beholder.*” And honestly, most like it that way. We can be judgmental, and still let *ourselves* off the hook.

But the message for us today, on this Ash Wednesday, and all throughout this Lenten season, is that while it may indeed be true that “*Dirty is in the eye of the beholder*” – there is only one eye that matters! The eye of God. The eye of God, who according to our Gospel Lesson, sees both what is done in public and what is done in secret. Who sees not only our actions, but also our words, and our inmost thoughts and desires. Who sees both what is done outwardly and what is in our hearts. . . . And although we may look at our world, and at each other, and at ourselves, and perhaps think, “*Hmm, not so bad!*” . . . “*Dirty is in the eye of the beholder.*” And according to God and what He sees, not only are we nowhere close to “Not so bad,” we are dirtier and more sinful than we

could ever imagine. It is as God has told us: ***“There is no one righteous – not even one.”*** (Romans 3:10)

To understand that is to understand just how powerful and pervasive sin is – not just in our world (which is where we *like* to think sin is), but in **us!** In you and me. That from the moment of our conception, sin has infected and corrupted every part of us. Even our eyes, so that we cannot even see how sinful we are! . . . That’s why we do what we do. That’s why we sin, even though often times we don’t want to sin. As Christians, we want to please our Heavenly Father and follow His ways, and yet we don’t. And after we do what we do not want to do, and what we know is wrong, we ask ourselves why?! . . . It is because we are sin. We don’t just do sin, we are sin. From top to bottom, in and out. That’s just how powerful and pervasive sin is. That is how much it has corrupted us. And that’s why all of us are going to die. Sin will demand that ultimate price from all of us. And Ash Wednesday powerfully reminds us of that today – with our black paraments, the ashes scratched into our foreheads, the somber mood and music.

OK, our world then says: if you think you’re dirty, if you have a problem, come clean; get it off your chest, and in so doing it will be *a cleansing experience* for you. . . . Well, *not really*. Simply calling dirty clothes dirty doesn’t make them clean. There needs to be something to make them clean, detergent or bleach. In the same way, acknowledging that you consumed poison doesn’t mean that it won’t hurt you. There needs to be something to counteract the poison, an antidote. . . . So too, simply noticing and acknowledging our sin, our guilt, and confessing it, as we did tonight, doesn’t take care of the problem. There needs to be something to make us clean, something outside of us, applied to us. And that something, for sin, is blood. For as the Old Testament plainly shows us again and again, and as we are told in Hebrews (chapter 9), ***“Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness.”*** Without blood, there is no cleansing.

And so while Ash Wednesday and Lent are about sin, they are even more about blood. And so also today, while recognizing our sin, and taking it seriously, and “calling a spade a spade,” we’re not here to morbidly dwell on our sin. We’re not here to bathe in self-pity or sorrow, or to somehow find some penitential and sacrificial equivalent to the shedding of our blood. No! To do that would be doing exactly what Jesus tells us in our Gospel Lesson not to do! . . . No, today we recognize our sin, repent of it, and then come to this altar and receive the blood that has washed it all away! ***“Take and drink, this is the blood of the New Testament, shed **for you** for the remission of your sins.”*** Shed for you. Shed instead of you, in your place. Shed to cleanse us from all our sin. All the sin that we do. All the sin that we do because of what we don’t do. All the sin that we think. All the sin that we speak. All the sin that is in our hearts. All the sin that we

inherited. All of it. Washed away by the only thing in this world that can – the blood of God, shed on the cross, for you!

And that’s the point Paul was making in the Epistle, where in those verses from Second Corinthians we read this incredible verse: “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” . . . Before I said that sin is not just what we do, it is who we are – and so here Paul is telling us that Jesus had to become who we are. And He did become who we are; He literally “became sin . . . for us” – and shed His blood on the cross in our place, and shed His blood for our forgiveness. . . . But not only that, notice then what we read next: “so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” And so through this blood, a great reversal has taken place. He who was righteous became sin, so that we who are sin might become the righteousness of God through faith in Him.

Or to put that in other words (words that you have already heard in this sermon): “*Dirty is in the eye of the beholder.*” Only now, a great reversal has taken place! Before, in our sin, we might think that we’re not so bad, while in God’s eye we are filthy sinners! But now, that has been reversed! It is exactly the opposite. Today, we have gathered here in God’s house and taken a look at ourselves, and we have seen how dirty and filthy we are. But now, because of the powerful blood of Christ, God looks at us and says, “*You are not dirty, but clean! Your sins have been forgiven. The blood of my Son has washed you clean. I see no dirt, no sin! Go in peace!*” . . . And we can. We can go in peace for we are at peace. At peace with God. Because there is blood here for us. There is forgiveness here for us.

So while it is true that “*Dirty is in the eye of the beholder,*” do not worry. Because no matter what you may think of yourself, or how you may feel, as I said before, there is only one eye that matters. And because of the powerful blood of Jesus His Son, in that eye that matters, the eye of God, you are clean!

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