

Sermon – Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
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Grace Lutheran Church
Ash Wednesday – Year C
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“A Topsy-Turvy Wednesday”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. If you thought you would never hear Mary Poppins referenced in a sermon for Ash Wednesday, well, you're not alone. I'm as surprised by anyone, and yet this is where we find ourselves. To be more precise, we find ourselves in the recent sequel film, walking through the London of the 1930s with the magical nanny and a new generation of Banks children. They are on their way to bring a broken heirloom to Mary's cousin Topsy, who can fix anything. Unless, of course, it happens to be the dreaded second Wednesday of the month when, from nine until noon, Topsy's world turns quite literally upside down. Her "whole world goes flippity-flop like a turtle on its back." For three hours, she can't tell her up from her down, her east from her west, her topsy from her bottomsy. Of course, by the end of a rousing musical number, Mary will have pointed out the blessing of all this, working her magic to save the day. But for now, it's enough to say I know how cousin Topsy feels. For while this is not a second Wednesday, it is an ashen one, and everything seems upside down and out of sorts. As I look out at you, I see ashen crosses of my making on your foreheads, willingly-accepted reminders of your fleeting life and coming death. And in the just-proclaimed gospel reading, Jesus speaks out against religion. What, we might well ask, is this all about? This is topsy-turvy territory, an upside-downing of the world in which we spend our time, the world wherein we thought things made sense.

2. Jesus, in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, takes on the religious pieties and practices of his day, turning them upside down. Don't make a big deal out of your generous giving, he says. Don't pray out loud in the synagogues or in the streets. Don't look miserable when you fast. The problem Jesus sees – in his day and in ours – is not with generosity or prayer or fasting, even if it does make you look miserable. The problem – the sin, as it were – is not in the action. It's in the intent. And Jesus calls us to repent of that intent. Give, yes, but don't advertise the gift. Pray, yes, but not in order to be seen. Fast, yes, but not for the sake of receiving admiration from others. Preach, yes, but not for the sake of a handshake and a "good sermon, pastor" in the line after worship. Be marked with the cross, yes, but not because it tells the world that the pastor marked you as "present" for Ash Wednesday worship. This brings us to the final injunction in today's passage: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth," but "store up for yourselves treasure in heaven." While this passage is often and rightly used as a standalone teaching about stewardship and earthly wealth, it is also commentary on what has come before. When we act rightly, but with self-righteous intent, we build nothing more than the worldly wealth of pride, accomplishment, and admiration. We are so out of sorts that we have turned the good and the godly into props to hold ourselves up, both in our own eyes and in the eyes of others. And if that's all we're after, it's all we'll end up with.
3. Jesus therefore calls us to repent of our intent. And while we may well make strides in that direction from time to time, part of the truth of this upside-down, ashen Wednesday, is that the situation is beyond our ability to remedy. We are too stuck in our ways, too stubborn. Look no further than the official Twitter account of the Lawrence, Kansas Police Department, which recently shared the "most ridiculous call of 2019 (so far)." Officers were dispatched to a parking garage where an incident of road rage was underway. Two drivers, referred to as Chad and Karen, had already been at loggerheads for 20 minutes. Chad was trying to exit the garage; Karen was

trying to enter. They couldn't get around each other so they just sat there, demanding that the other person back up and let them around. The police offered the obvious suggestion that one of them could move, but neither was having it. Since the dispute was on private property, and because no crime was being committed, the police finally gave up, encouraged them to grow up, and left. Chad and Karen remained as they were. At some point they must have resolved their conflict, because a few days later the police went back to check, and tweeted, "Pleased to report that at last check Chad and Karen had moved on. Not from their pettiness, just from the parking lot. Happy Friday night to everyone, except Chad and Karen."

4. The law, even on Jesus' lips, can make perfectly reasonable, life-enhancing demands, but just as the Lawrence police found themselves unable to convince Chad and Karen to do the decent thing, so too is the law unable to convince us to abandon our self-centered ways and live for the sake of God and our neighbor. We end up at loggerheads, blocking ourselves to spite each other, and the world becomes what the world has become. Jesus knows that what we need, finally, is not new encouragement to follow the old law. We need new hearts that will properly treasure the new gifts of God given in Christ. And to receive new hearts, we need to be rid of the old ones. To live, we need to die. For it is in our dying in Christ, Paul writes to the church at Corinth, that we live.
5. And that is why, on this odd Wednesday, we have come to be marked with ashen crosses, reminded – whether we are young or old – that we came from dust and that we will return to dust. That although we are alive now, we will die. But because those ashes of mortality are cruciform, we also receive the promise that in Christ we will live. These ashes are a bold declaration, proclaiming to the world that we are the ones who have come to know this truth: We have nowhere else to go, no one else to whom we can turn. This is it for us. We are old, wrongheaded and brokenhearted people, and we're

going to die. But even more are we people newly created through the death and resurrection of Jesus, gifted with new hearts and right spirits, saved to proclaim the grace of Jesus and to unsnarl the traffic jams of this world, finally free to live with the proper intention of serving and loving God, one another, and the creation we inhabit. Because with new hearts, what else would we do? As Martin Luther wrote in the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, "The law says, 'Do this,' and it is never done. Grace says, 'believe in this,' and everything is already done." Which is, to quote Mary Poppins, "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious."

6. Jesus' warning to us on this upside-down day is to not try to make too much of ourselves in this life, at least not in the eyes of others or for our own sake. Save your bold prayers and your loud witness instead for the sake of announcing that you have nowhere else to turn, but that God in Christ has turned to you determinedly. We've been trying to make something out of our lives, and all it got us was dust and death. As it turns out, that's all God needs from us. For out of death, through Christ, comes life. And with life, and the perspective of a newly alive heart, we're suddenly right at home in the right-side-up Kingdom of God. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.