

There is a danger for us in reading this gospel lesson where Jesus encourages us to pray in private and practice our religion in secret, where only God can see.

He spoke these words to a crowd that was used to watching their spiritual leaders turn prayer into an Olympic event, preening and posturing for style points and the reverence of onlookers.

They must be trying to impress others, Jesus concludes, because God wasn't impressed, yet it is God that is the focus of prayer, not other people.

Urban Lutherans like us, I suspect, are more likely to fall into the other side of the same trap.

We also are far too concerned about what other people might think of us, so instead of showy prayers and ostentatious displays of piety, we are more likely to shut the door and pray in secret because we are Christians who are afraid to come out of closet.

Public display of religion, the meal ticket to respect in Jesus' context, is now the opposite in current day Chicago...it's a threat to our credibility.

And since we are just as worried about public perception and reputation as those Pharisees were, and since we also are anywhere from invested to obsessed with our treasures stored up on earth, we who are today's hypocrites wash our faces and look our sharpest and do our best to hide our disfigured hearts and the surprisingly deep faith of which we are too easily ashamed.

One of the unique gifts of Ash Wednesday for us, then, is the chance to wear our faith on our faces, to walk out in public with an odd, glaring smudge on our foreheads that gives us away as having been to church.

And it does not proclaim how great or pious we are or how highly God must think of us; instead,
it shouts our vulnerability, our mortality, and our sinfulness.

Like Cain's mark, it identifies us as protected by God not because of who we are and what we
have done but in spite of it.

It speaks not of our glory but of God's, but it does speak.

The people at work and class and store and restaurant and salon and bar notice, and it
may serve as an entryway into sacred conversation in the secular arena.

But it does more than signal our relationship with God.

It signals *our* relationship with God.

We all receive the same mark, the same shape, the same ash, the same cross of Christ.

This sign proclaims not only our connection to God but also our connection, as common
dustlings reunited in Christ, with one another.

We do not pray or practice or profess or confess or live or die alone.

We stand before God together.

Yes, it remains true that we have individual personalities, sins and shortcomings, that we have
things for which only we can take responsibility and blame.

But we already know this only too well; our society constantly reinforces our individuality and
elevates it to a form of idolatry.

What is also true, and what we too easily forget, is that we have a communal relationship with
God, including communal sins in which we all share.

Perhaps we should begin by confessing our individualism, our self-centeredness even when we
reduce corporate confession of sin to my personal laundry list of faults and mistakes.

There are sins for which we share guilt together, failures of our community for which no one individual can rightly be blamed or exonerated.

When we confess our sins in a few moments, the language is plural...perhaps we should think about pride, intemperance, waste and everything else as shared rather than singular.

If nothing else, doing so will get us started praying together rather than separately, and a community that prays together cannot help but draw closer not only to God but also to one another.

Indeed, this particular Lent, we have occasion to be praying together.

Our ongoing congregational vision discernment process reaches a crescendo this weekend with a meeting of leaders and representatives to prioritize goals and shape a plan for the years ahead.

That plan will be published quickly so that we can all consider it prayerfully, so that all of us can pray about it not just as individuals but also together as a community.

Asking for God's guidance is an important and appropriate piece of prayer.

But so also is confession, and we should be doing that together too.

To that end, I want to spend the rest of the sermon in prayer with you.

I offer what follows out of the eyes and ears and heart that I have.

You know only too well as I do that your pastor is a sinner.

My perspective is not only limited, it is tainted with much that I alone need to confess.

I love and appreciate this congregation more than I know how to say, yet not as I ought, only as I am able.

There are things I miss: things I overstate and things I overlook.

But this is true of all of our prayers, corporate and individual...they are the incomplete offerings of faithful and sinful people, often deeply insightful and wise, always limited, and we rely on God to fill in the gaps, forgive the mistakes, and hear what we should have said.

And so, after every sentence of our prayer, I invite you, if you agree and if you are willing, to say, *Hear us, good Lord.*

Let us pray:

God of Resurrection Lutheran Church, God of Lakeview, God of creation: receive our thanks for your gift of prayer, for the promise of your attentive ear, for your Spirit among us.

[Hear us, good Lord.]

Forgive us for our prostitution with lesser gods, like money and security and comfort and convenience. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Forgive us for our impatience and bitterness with one another, for offering complaint instead of compassion, for judgmentalism instead of mercy. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Forgive us our apathy and complacency with our neighborhood, our unconcern for the world around us. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Forgive us our neglect of one another, our failure to notice absence and pain and struggle of those in our midst. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Forgive us for failing to honor and treasure those closest to you, those at the beginning of their life on earth and those who are nearing the end, and those at every point in life who are most vulnerable, with the tenderness and love you hold for them. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Forgive us for overtaxing a few people by asking too much and squandering the gifts of many

by asking too little. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Forgive us for failing to love one another as much as ourselves, and for failing to love ourselves as much as one another. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Forgive us for failing to dedicate time and focus to the study of your Word and the celebration of your grace in our lives, for enslaving ourselves to secular demands while demeaning Sunday worship as one option among many. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Forgive us for talking about each other instead of to each other, and for our fearful avoidance of constructive conflict. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Forgive us for resting on our laurels, for touting our progressive legacy while being lazy and apathetic about real social justice and human need. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Forgive us for wasting paper, wasting gasoline, wasting energy, and contributing both through sins of omission and emission to the savage abuse of our planet. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Forgive us for our insensitivity in what we say and our oversensitivity to what others say to us. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Forgive us for reducing the mystery of your love into mere religion, and for commodifying your grace into individual blessings and services. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Forgive us for worrying too much about money and too little about mission, for both our sloppy stewardship and our half-hearted trust. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Forgive us for welcoming visitors and new members but then failing to shepherd them into a deeper relationship with you. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Forgive us for our lukewarm commitments and for our resentment toward those we judge not committed enough. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Forgive us for looking at our watch instead of our heart, and for looking for problems without

striving for solutions. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Forgive us for hoarding our faith and our time and our treasures, for our stingy and fearful unwillingness to share whatever you have given us that we believe is not enough. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Forgive us for giving up, and forgive us also for trying too hard; forgive us for imagining that we can save ourselves and for assuming that you can't. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Forgive us for taking you for granted, for undervaluing your grace and overlooking the forms it takes in our community, for failing to see the beauty of your face in the people around us and in the worship, music, sacraments and sacredness we share. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Open our eyes to see and our hearts to embrace your love and your calling, your delight in us and your dreams for us. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Guide us through this season of Lent and into the next few years with a clear vision of your hope for our identity and mission. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Help us to celebrate and strengthen all that is holy and right here, and to follow your lead in improving all that is amiss. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Help us to accept, admit and embrace our limitations, and see in all our cracks open windows for the sunlight of your grace. *[Hear us, good Lord.]*

Receive our thanks for hearing us, for your patience and persistence in loving and forgiving us, for your determination in welcoming and restoring us, and teach us not only to trust that you hear us, good Lord, but also to open our ears and hearts to hear you. Amen