

**Ash Wednesday**  
**February 22, 2012**  
**Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

*“A Savior Who Serves: Prayer”*

The Lenten season begins today with a cross of ashes marking our foreheads, reminding us of our own mortality as those haunting words first spoken by God to Adam after the fall into sin are now spoken to us as well: **“Remember, you are dust and to dust you shall return”** (Genesis 3:19). We are reminded that we, too, are but dust and ashes, and that we will also one day die. This is the consequence of sin – not just Adam’s, but our own; not just Adam’s original sin, but our own actual sin. The ashes on our forehead are in the shape of a cross, reminding us that through Jesus’ suffering and death upon the cross the sting of death has been removed for those who trust in him. As Jesus told Mary and Martha after their brother, Lazarus, died: **“Whoever lives and believes in me will never die”** (John 11: ). For the child of God, death is spelled with a little “d.” For the child of God, although death may be painful, it is physical and temporary. In Jesus, we have a Savior who serves by giving his life upon the cross for our sins, and through Jesus’ saving work, although we experience death, it is not death spelled with a capital “D.” It is physical and temporary, not spiritual and eternal. Jesus’ death has destroyed the power of death.

There can be this tension as we enter into the season of Lent with a cross of ashes on our foreheads – something that is very external and obvious. On the one hand, we have this outward sign of our repentance and our own mortality, but on the other hand we have the words of Jesus in the Gospel lesson for Ash Wednesday: **“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”** (Matthew 6:1). Jesus goes on to say that our giving to the needy cannot simply be for show, and our praying cannot be just to be seen by others, and our fasting cannot be just to impress people. Jesus instructs us that if what we want is to be noticed for what we’re doing, then we have received our reward, but it’s a pretty shallow reward. He calls us to something different; something deeper and richer.

Lent is about new beginnings; it’s about starting over. No matter where we’ve been or what we’ve done, Lent is a call for each one of us to **“return to the Lord your God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love”** (see Old Testament reading from Joel 2:12-19 and the verse before the Gospel reading). During the Epiphany season, our focus was on **Being SJLC** (Serving Jesus – Living in Community), and on ways we can serve God by serving our neighbor. This is a WWJD response: “What would Jesus do?” But before we can ask WWJD, we first have to ask WDJD: “What did Jesus do?” During the Lenten season, we’re going to focus on what Jesus did, and how He came to serve us – to give his life upon the cross in order that we might not die eternally, but that we might be saved. Week by week, in both midweek and weekend worship services, we will look at how Jesus came to serve under the theme: “A Savior Who Serves.” Inside the back cover of today’s worship bulletin is a listing of each week’s focus.

Part of our life-long journey of faith, as well as our Lenten pilgrimage, involves prayer. In today’s Gospel lesson Jesus gives instruction on how we are to pray. He calls us to enter into a private place where we will not be distracted and speak to our heavenly Father privately and candidly. God commands and invites

believers in Jesus to pray (see Matthew 7:7-8; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18); it is both our duty and our joy. In life, we look forward to catching up with people who matter to us: family members who live away from us, friends we haven't seen for awhile. These are people we want to be in touch with! On a much deeper level, God our Maker and Redeemer desires for us to be in touch with him. He's already in touch with us through his Word and Sacraments, and He now wants that close relationship with us. In Jesus, we have a Savior who serves, who by his life of perfect service and by his innocent suffering and death, has opened a 24/7 line of instant communication for us with the most powerful force in the universe: our heavenly Father! Why would we not want to take advantage of this? We're too busy – got too much going on? If you're too busy to pray, you're too busy – period. Lent is a very good time to cut down on the noise and distractions we all have in life. Maybe we feel guilty that we don't measure up to what God expects from us? Tell that to God. Share honestly what you are thinking and feeling, not what you think God wants you to say. If our friends and loved ones can tell when we're not being honest in our communication with them, don't you think God can? Maybe we're hesitant in prayer because we're not sure God really cares. Remember, this is the One who sent his only Son into the world to suffer and die for us. That's how much God really does care for us, and knowing how much we are loved by God in Jesus is the foundation of our prayer life. As Luther says, "... God tenderly invites us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children, so that with all boldness and confidence we may ask Him as dear children ask their dear father" (Luther's explanation to the Introduction of the Lord's Prayer).

Jesus has given us an example and model of how to pray, the Lord's Prayer, found here in Mathew 6, but unfortunately, not included in today's Gospel lesson. In this Lenten season, take up the Catechism and read again Luther's explanation to the different petitions of this beloved Prayer. Let us reclaim prayer for what it is: a vital and important part of our faith life, not only during Lent but at all times. And it all begins with a Savior who serves, Jesus Christ, our Lenten Lord. To him be the glory and praise forever. Amen.