“Your secret connection.” Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

“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. “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. The time when the Body of Christ reflects on what Jesus has done for us and what it means for our new lives in Christ. Today we have such an interesting part of the Sermon on the Mount to meditate upon.

As we read, Jesus speaks about two kinds of people. One kind are those who love to be good, who love to be seen and recognized and praised for being good. And the other kind are those who… simply love Jesus, who love the God of the Bible. What do you think, which ones are we?

Perhaps, it would be more fitting to speak not about two kinds of people, as about those two kinds of very different and conflicting motivations that we all, all Christians, carry in us and with which we all struggle on daily bases. One - to be good in our own eyes and in the eyes of those around us, the other… to simply love our gracious Father.

The former motivation the Bible calls the Old Adam in us, and the latter is the new man, a new creation in Christ. What Jesus is talking about is nothing new but the same struggle to live out our baptism that Dr Luther describes in the Small Catechism.

"**The Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever**."

Those two motivations also reflect the two ways we may think about Lent. On the one hand, we can think about it as a time when we do something special for God, to give up something for God, to do something more to be better Christians, to be better.

On the other hand, we can think about Lent as a time when our abundantly gracious God wants to bless us with His special blessings, when He wants to flood us with His grace and mercy, when He wants to bless you with something truly amazing.

Yes, this is what Jesus does! With that brief exhortation that we read, He not only helps us to understand our ongoing struggle but also teaches how to receive and nourish one of the most wonderful gifts that there are for those who love Him.

Let's see what is this gift that He desires to give you and what tips Jesus gives us so that we can receive it well. Jesus speaks about three different what we could call acts of piety or spiritual disciplines, which were well known to His contemporaries.

That is, giving to the needy, praying and fasting. Why mention those three? Is there any particular significance? Perhaps, there is. There are many ways we can serve our neighbors, to do them good, but many of those things cannot be done secretly.

But when it comes to those – giving, praying and fasting, we can choose different paths. We can do it publicly, visibly, we can announce what we do, we can draw other people's attention to it, "sound the trumpet" as Jesus said, we can be led by the motivation of being good and being seen and recognized as being good.

And this ties together with what Jesus says about gathering treasures. These are real treasures, when you have a good name, good reputation, when people praise you and honor you, when they appreciate you for being such a great member of society. These are treasures we all long for in our heart – honor, glory, recognition, praise. They are so sweet that they can be properly called treasures of our lives.

But then, Jesus guides us on a different path. He suggests we give up all of that and instead do our works of love in secret, so that no one, no one [!] but the Father would know it. Give in such a way that only you and the Father know! Pray is such a way that only you and the Father knows! If you fast, then fast in such a way that only the Father knows. But why? What is the point?

Do you have, or have you had a really good friend? Someone with whom you could share your deepest secrets and most intimate thoughts. With whom you could have this very special bond of souls, complete openness, trust, a very special intimacy.

This is what Jesus is offering you! If you take up His instructions, if you practice your giving and praying and fasting in secret, there will be only one more person besides you who will know what you have done.

There will be only one more person besides you who will be able to appreciate, to rejoice and to praise you for what you have done. Only One with whom you will share your good works done in secret. Do you see what a wonderful bond, what wonderful intimacy this creates and cultivates between you and God the Father?!

Where will your treasure be? Who will see the works of love that you have done, who will know the truth of your selfless and generous sacrifice and service, who will praise you, who will honor you, who will embrace you with His Spirit, who will pour His love and affection over you and will fill you with His joy? Who?!

Yes, your Father who is in heaven, and Your Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. He becomes your treasure; He becomes your greatest reward. Being known by Him, sharing your secret acts of love with Him alone. This intimate friendship, this bond of the Spirit like no other, that is what Jesus wants you to have and experience.

Remember, He was rich beyond comprehension, and He did give it all up for you before we even knew it. He has been praying to the Father on behalf of you when you didn't even realize it. He fasted in His earthly days alone in the desert, in secret, as He was getting ready for His mission to free you and make you His own.

Only He and the Father knew it… and that was more than enough for Jesus. That was more than the recognition, praise and honor of the entire world. This is what Jesus wants you to experience too.

I pray that we all take His words seriously, that we strive to act as He instructs us so that you can also be blessed the way our Father longs to bless you, with such intimate bond, with such divine fellowship, with so much joy in that secret connection.

And those little crosses on our foreheads that remind us that dust we are and to dust we shall return, let them also remind us of who you are. You are Jesus' treasure, you are where His heart is also, and nothing is going to change that.

I pray that your Lent and every other season of this year be filled with rewards from the Father, with the secret connection that you have.

Amen.