

Subtle shift to works righteousness

Jesus didn't die to change behaviors, political systems, institutions



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We are in the middle of Lent—the season of spiritual warfare, or at least really good intentions. Many of us now engage in some form of Lenten discipline. We give up something: chocolate or coffee or FreeCell. Or we add something: Scripture reading, midweek worship or service projects. This seems normal and familiar to us just as

the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday or crossing ourselves has become normal and familiar in many of our congregations.

I remember a time when none of these practices would be considered Lutheran by large segments of our church. Too works righteous, too showy, too ... Roman Catholic! We didn't need to, nor could we make ourselves holy or righteous. That was the whole point of justification by grace through faith apart from works of the law (Romans 3:21-28, Article IV of the Augsburg Confession).

We overcorrected. Fasting, prayer, Scripture study, acts of service, imposition of ashes and making the sign of the cross are classical spiritual disciplines that not only have an ancient history in Christian practice but also serve to engage our whole selves in devotion to God. These practices serve to draw us closer to and make us more aware of the love of God shown through Jesus' death and resurrection that justifies sinners, but they aren't what justifies us.

As scrupulous as we have been in proclaiming grace and eschewing works in our faith practices, I've noticed the not so subtle shift to works righteousness in the work we do as the church. This exists in all three expressions—congregations, synods and churchwide—and all across the cultural spectrum. Jesus' invitation to repentance and discipleship have become a kind of transaction between us and God where we figure out what we have done wrong, promise to work really hard to be better people, and then God forgives us. What we see as the moral wrongs that must be repented

depends largely on our place on the cultural spectrum. The cultural right is preoccupied with private mores and behavior and the cultural left is preoccupied with political rights and the activities of government and business institutions.

Here's how that plays out. While driving through the Smoky Mountains on a family road trip, I saw a billboard that declared: "No smoking, drinking, card playing, dancing, movie going, swearing ... there is no sin within 7 miles of our church!" Wow. There must not have been any people within 7 miles of that church. That is the works righteousness of the right.

The works righteousness of the left plays out a little differently. If there are enough sit-ins or protests, or boycotts or enough petitions, we could inaugurate the kingdom of God. Then we could extricate ourselves from this bondage to sin. We could build a perfect world.

There is a purveyor of high-end, organic, locally sourced groceries that is the temple of this persuasion. You can buy veal there without guilt because its source of veal is the little calf that, after gamboling across the fields, turns itself in to the butcher and declares (quoting Charles Dickens): "It is

a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done." No. Something has to die so we can live. We are complicit in the world's brokenness.

We may work for justice or righteousness with the best intentions,

and God knows there is plenty of work to do. But Jesus didn't die to change behaviors or political systems or institutions. Jesus died to end the fundamental brokenness and estrangement from God that is the result of human sin, our rebellion against God that infects every aspect of our lives.

Just as Jesus' miracles in the Gospel of John are called signs that point to the new thing God is doing in Christ, so should our work for justice be signs that point to the new life we have in Christ. We're pointing in the wrong direction if our work becomes the new life instead of a sign of the new life.

Lent can be a time to ponder this priceless gift. The death and resurrection of Christ has changed everything, a change no human effort could ever bring about. □

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