

***Ash Wednesday: Psalm 51:17
A Broken Heart is not Despised***

Rev. Dr. David H. Benke, President, Atlantic District

Appointed lessons:

[Joel 2:1-2, 12-17](#) or [Isaiah 58:1-12](#)

[Psalm 51:1-17](#)

[2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10](#)

[Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21](#)

It's hard to capture in the stiff poses of centennial yesteryear's tintypes the struggles of individuals and congregations in the Atlantic District to make their way in a new country, a new neighborhood, a new parish. But we know those struggles took place. And we know by definition of our very existence that whatever the battles were, the Lord remained in charge of His Church. In our District's more recent history, the battles become part of our own genetic code, as the District was severed into three parts, excising New Jersey and New England, in 1971; and further as the chaos of the 1970s caused almost a third of the remaining congregations to leave the Missouri Synod; and further as the ashes of destruction from the Twin Towers threatened to hack the Atlantic District off from the rest of the LCMS. Tough stuff. Not unlike what happens to an individual as life produces ups and downs, twists and turns, bites and hacks and scratches.

Times of struggle, of crisis, of pain, however, reveal for the Christian and the Christian organism, whether parish or district, the source of the heart's treasure. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount points us to the spot where the treasure is stored, whatever that treasure is. "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." The psalmist cuts us to the core. It is not enough to test the spirit, to put in for cardiac blood-test, to take the upgrade building on the past. No, we must be ripped and torn. No, what God does not despise is a BROKEN heart. The acceptable sacrifice is a BROKEN spirit.

What the Atlantic District has had over all other Missouri Synod regions for one hundred years is the greatest opportunity to reach the world with the love of God in Christ. How many tens of millions have not come to our shores and villages along this northeast seaboard? And how many millions have we failed to touch with the Gospel's embrace? How much of that has been due to our own neglect, selfishness, or internal squawks and squabbles? Indeed, how much of our pain has not been self-inflicted?

The Priceless Treasure is Jesus. Our heart's desire is to rest in Him. When a person begins to acknowledge deep loss, there comes a moment, a moment of true emptiness, when all that is left is hope in God. That's it. Nothing else. And at that moment, the broken and contrite heart is renewed as the True Presence of Christ is provided through God's Word, through the Body and Blood of the Lamb, and through the prayers of God's faithful people. If you're reading this, you have had this experience, and you know it is to completely to God's grace. It is the same for us as Christian community, whether at the parish, the regional, the district or the national level. In the repentant realization of responsibility comes refreshment and renewal, precisely in the One who was broken for us. That's what it took. The breaking of One Heart, One Spirit, One Life poured out for us. In Jesus' Name, let us begin this Lenten season in the dust, and let us find the balm of healing for our broken hearts.

- *David H. Benke*

The Litany for Ash Wednesday

Kneel/Stand

P God the Father, in heaven,

C Have mercy.

P God the Son, Redeemer of the world,

C Have mercy

P God the Holy Spirit,

C Have mercy.

P Be gracious to us.

C Spare us, good Lord.

P Be gracious to us.

C Help us, good Lord.

P By the mystery of your holy incarnation;
By your holy nativity;
By your baptism, fasting and temptation,
By your agony and bloody sweat;
By your cross and Passion;
By your precious death and burial;
By your glorious resurrection and ascension;
And by the coming of the Holy Spirit, the comforter;

C Help us, good Lord.

P In all time of our tribulation;
In all time of our prosperity;
In the hour of death; and in the day of judgment;

C Help us, good Lord.

P We poor sinners implore you

C to hear us, O Lord.

P To prosper the preaching of your Word;
To bless our prayer and meditation;
To strengthen and preserve us in the true faith;
To give heart to our sorrow and strength to our repentance;

C We implore you to hear us, good Lord.

- P To draw all to yourself
To bless those who are instructed in the faith;
To watch over and console the poor, the sick, the distressed, the lonely, the forsaken, the abandoned, and all who stand in need of our prayers;
And to have mercy on us all;
- C We implore you to hear us, good Lord.**
- P To turn our hearts to you;
To turn the hearts of our enemies, persecutors and slanderers, and graciously
To hear our prayers;
- C We implore you to hear us, good Lord.**
- P Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,
C We implore you to hear us.
- P Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,
C Have mercy.
- P Christ, the Lam of God, who takes away the sin of the world,
C Have mercy.
- P Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,
C grant us your peace.
- P O Christ,
C hear us.
- P O Lord,
C hear us.
- P O Lord,
C Have mercy.
- P O Christ,
C Have mercy.
- C O Lord, have mercy. Amen.**

The lifeline of a district and its congregations and ministries is like that of an individual – lots of ups and downs, twists and turns. Institutions take wrong turns, too, and the force of circumstance has drawn us closer to God or assisted us in wandering off on our own. Reflection produces an open heart, then a broken heart, a contrite heart, and the ability to receive divine absolution and renewal – a clean heart, a right spirit, and appropriate joy which is rooted in salvation.