

March 11, 2020 – Psalm 121, Romans 13:8-14, Mark 14:32-42

Mortification. It's one of those fun theological terms that a pastor might throw out to show how smart he is, like I'm doing right now. But it's actually a really interesting Christian doctrine, with a long history in scripture, in the Christian church, and, in particular, during Lent.

Mortification has, at its root, to mortify something. To put something to death. And, as a theological term, it is putting to death our flesh. The desires of our flesh. The sins of our flesh. The needs of our flesh.

For example, Lent has, from ancient times, been a time for fasting. I was just mentioning in Bible class how the medieval tradition was for monks and priests to fast from Monday to Saturday throughout the season of Lent. Eating only on Sunday, so that they might receive the Lord's Supper and treat each Sunday of Lent as a "little Easter" before returning to the weekly fast.

This is why we refer to the 40 days of Lent, even though Lent is actually 46 days long. The Sundays don't count. They are the Sundays "in" Lent, but not the Sundays "of" Lent. They are not part of the Lenten fast.

And, of course, having 40 days of Lent lines up with Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness. When he really did fast for 40 days straight. And was, no doubt, extremely weak by the end of it.

Fasting is a form of mortification. When you deny yourself food, you remind yourself of exactly what Jesus told the devil: man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

We don't live because of food. We live because God made us alive, physically and spiritually. And yes, he gives us food and drink to support this body and life, as Luther says in the catechism. But, without the Word of God to give us life, we are dust and to dust we will return. We are dead with God. And in fasting, we mortify the flesh.

Why am I talking about mortification tonight? Well, because there are lots of other, very scriptural ways to mortify the flesh. Sitting in sackcloth and ashes, for example. From which the practice of Ash Wednesday is derived.

Kneeling in prayer, or even prostrating yourself on the floor, as Luther was known to do, is another one. Neither position is particularly comfortable, and both are rather humbling postures. And that's the point. You mortify the flesh by coming before God in a way that honors him but denies yourself.

Jesus brings up yet another way to mortify the flesh in our Passion Reading this evening. But it's not one that we think of very often when we think of mortification. And it certainly wasn't one that the disciples recognized.

They've just finished the Last Supper, celebrating the Passover. It's a meal of roasted lamb and unleavened bread and rich wine. Their bellies are full. They're relaxed by the wine. It's well after dark. And they are ready to go to bed.

And it's at this moment that Jesus says, "Let's go to Gethsemane and pray for a bit." Now? Really, Jesus? It's gettin a bit late, don't you think? Alright. I guess. If that's what you want.

They march through the cool night air. Out of the lights of Jerusalem. Into the pitch black of the garden. Judas had already snuck off by this point, so Jesus leaves 8 of his disciples at a spot where they can sit, and takes his innermost circle – Peter, James, and John – in a little further with him. And he tells them, "*My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch.*"

Remain here and watch. It seems like such a simple request. Such a simple way of mortifying the flesh. So simple, they probably didn't even think about it in those terms. "Remain here and watch. Sure thing, Jesus. No... <yawn> ...problem. <snore>"

"*Simon! Are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour?*" What? I'm awake. Totally... awake... <snore> "*Simon!*" Sorry! Sorry... I don't know what to say... <snore> "*Are you still sleeping?*"

It would actually be comical, if not for the circumstances. Because these are literally their last moments with Jesus before he is arrested and crucified. All he wants is for them to have a little self-control. All he wants is for them to watch and pray. And they can't even stay awake.

*"The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."* It's a humbling thing to realize just how weak you are. And that's really the point of mortification. At least, it is for a Lutheran.

For other denominations, Roman Catholics, for example, mortification is about strengthening our self-control. About disciplining our flesh until our spirit can rule over it. About becoming less and less sinful by killing our sinful desires.

That's a nice theory. One that Luther himself subscribed to as a monk for many years. But, eventually, he realized it doesn't actually work. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. And it will always be weak. It is the nature of sinful flesh to be perpetually weak, no matter what we do to strengthen it.

And so, we mortify our flesh not as a process of sanctification. Not as a way to make ourselves better. But to realize how bad we are. How weak we are. How much we struggle even to do something as simple as fast for a day or two. Or kneel in prayer for a couple minutes. Or stay awake when our Lord says, *"Watch and pray."*

We mortify our flesh and we confess that we are poor, miserable sinners. Sinful in thought, word, and deed. Sinful and weak in every way.

And then we turn to the one who truly did mortify his flesh entirely for our sake. Who fasted for 40 days and withstood every temptation of the devil. Whose soul was sorrowful to the point of death and who begged his Father to remove this cup from him, yet still said, *"Not what I will, but what you will."* Whose spirit was willing. Whose body was willing. Who set his face to the cross and refused to back down. Even as he was being nailed to the tree.

I once heard a Lutheran theologian say that the Garden of Gethsemane was Jesus' last opportunity to run from the crucifixion. Of course, Jesus could have done a miracle and stopped it at any time. But at the Garden of Gethsemane it wouldn't have even taken a miracle. He simply could have stood up and walked away. Gone somewhere Judas wouldn't look for him. It would have been so easy.

But he didn't. He mortified his flesh. He literally died. And for what? For people who couldn't even stay awake and pray with him. That is the love of God for sinners. That is the love of God, for you and me.

*"Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep."* He who keeps you in his arms is not tripped up by things like desires of the flesh or the weaknesses of the body. *"The Lord will keep you from all evil: he will keep you life."* Even if it means sacrificing his own.

Mortification is a good thing. It's good to put the desires of your flesh to death. It's good to wake up from sleep, literally and figuratively, and see just how quickly the works of darkness have come into our lives. Just how near the day of our salvation really is. Mortification is a good thing.

But mortification is not going to save us. Only the death and resurrection of Jesus can do that. Only by putting on the Lord Jesus Christ through Holy Baptism can we truly make no provision for the flesh. For when we put on his death, our flesh can no longer condemn us. And when we put on his life, our spirit is made new.

Where does our help come from? It doesn't come by fasting or kneeling. By putting on sackcloth and ashes or fighting off sleep. No, our help comes from the Lord. And in him we find not just the sleep that flesh demands. In him we find rest for our souls. Amen.