

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 Ash Wednesday

This year Ash Wednesday stands in a unique position within the church year. Tonight we are mid-way between Christmas and Easter. We celebrated our Lord's birth 46 days ago. We will celebrate His resurrection 46 days from now. Is this a coincidence? Certainly it is. Nonetheless, it is a fitting coincidence. For as we enter these 40 days of Lent, we watch closely as He who was born for us, now goes to the cross to suffer and die for us. Did I say 40 days? Yes, not 46. For Lent does not include Sundays. Each Sunday is a celebration of Easter. For even as we watch our Savior travel the road of agony, we do so anticipating the joy and triumph of His resurrection.

And so with Lent now upon us, we hear the question once again, "What are you doing for Lent?" Roman Catholics talk about what they are giving up for Lent. Protestant churches of varying denominations are using these 40 days to look at their "Purpose Driven Life." But the better question to ask is "What is God doing for Lent?" Lent is not about what you do for God, but what God does for you. Unfortunately, we have the in-born desire to put ourselves on the top of the heap. We want to be recognized for what we do. We are very much aware of all that we do. And we like to receive honor where honor is due.

But Jesus says "Beware." Beware of practicing your religion for the purpose of being noticed by others. We are not to blow a trumpet when we sacrifice for the church. Whether it's a monetary contribution or a work of labor done with our hands, Jesus says, "Do not even let your left hand know what your right hand is doing."

When it comes to prayer, we like to be thought of as "prayer warriors" for the Lord. We talk about how much we have accomplished by our praying. We act like God is some mighty puppet in the sky controlled by our "heartfelt" prayers. But again Jesus says, "Beware." Beware of boasting about the "power" of your prayers. Before you pray, Jesus knows your needs and before you bow your head, Jesus answers.

We may not fast in the same way it was done in Jesus' day. It was an action of humility where physical food was replaced with spiritual food for a time. Studying the Word of God instead of eating for a day or longer is good Christian exercise. But the temptation is to fast for the purpose of having your Christian humility noticed by others. And that we are guilty of. We like others to see what a humble Christian we are. We like the honor, the recognition.

We stand condemned by Jesus' words, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." And our treasure lies with men. Our religion is fake. Our way of life is a lie. Our Christianity is a front. All that we do and say is done for the wrong motive. Our treasure is being noticed by others; being accepted by our peers; being honored and recognized. On these things our heart is focused. For these things our heart longs for and desires.

Do not fear. For the very words that condemn you also give you pardon and peace. Because Lent is not about what you do, it is about what God does. Lent is not about your actions. It's about what God has done to forgive your guilty heart and wicked actions. And so we ask this question of God, where is His treasure? For where His treasure is, there His heart is also. Friend, you are God's treasure. Jesus calls you "a hidden treasure"; "a pearl

of great price.” You are a treasure in the eyes of your God. Not because of anything in you. Not because of anything you do for God. God treasures you because of who He is, and He is the friend of sinners. Like the woman caught in adultery upon whom Jesus had mercy; like the prodigal son who was shown mercy by his father; the thief on the cross, Zaccheus, denying Peter. Each one of these sinners God treasured, just as He treasures you. “And where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

Lent shows us most clearly the heart of God. His heart is beating loudly upon a cross. It’s beating for you. Beating to cause His blood to pulse out of His body. Out of the holes where the nails were pounded in. Out of the holes made by the thorns on His head. Out of the holes caused by the whips. God shows you His heart at the cross, and He gives you His heart here at His Table. Where His treasure is, there His heart is also. You are God’s treasure, and so here in His sacrament He gives you His heart. It’s a heart of grace; a heart of love; a heart of forgiveness. It’s a heart that was broken, bleeding, dying. A heart pierced, a heart silenced, and then made alive again. He bids you, His treasure, to come to His Table, and here He gives you His heart.

The Lord’s Supper is the “marriage bed” of the Christian faith. This is where Christ becomes most intimate with you. He becomes one with you. He gives His heart to His beloved Bride. You are His Bride, His treasure, His Church; sinners washed clean of your sins in the river of His blood. You may walk only a few feet up here to His altar, but in truth you are walking across centuries of time. For in coming to His supper, we come to the cross, to Calvary, to a heart full of love for us and now given to us under bread and wine.

Our religion may be fake; our way of life a lie; but God is no liar. There is no falsehood in His promise to you. You are forgiven. Everything fake about you is cleansed. Everything wrong within you is pardoned. “Create in me a clean heart, O God,” we cry. And He does. For here at His table, He gives you His heart.

This is what Lent is all about. Not what we do for Him, but what He does for us. Amen.