

All Saints Episcopal Church

Steenrijk

Willemstad, Curacao

Ash Wednesday

February 22, 2023

DRAFT

“Treasure in Heaven”

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

The Holy Gospel Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Jesus said, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your

Father in heaven. “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others.

Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever 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.

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“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

May our hearts be cleansed from self-obsession, may our minds be prepared for your visitation, and may our ears be drawn to the words of truth you would have us hear. Amen.

Five times in the readings for this day, the words “fast” and “fasting” occur. We cannot escape the need to consider restricting our diets during this period of Lent, though in recent times that particular direction has been pushed back more and more, while our national average waistlines get larger and larger. "Moreover when you fast," Jesus says in Matthew 6, Verse 16. Jesus does not command us to fast, but he assumes we will fast, but he also helps us to fast rightly and to avoid problems associated with fasting.

Fasting involves abstinence from food and/or drink for a period of time. Fasting is used to express grief (1 Samuel 31:13; 2 Samuel 1:12; 12:20-23) or penitence (1 Samuel 7:6; 1 Kings 21:27). It is also used to prepare us for prayer (2 Samuel 12:16-17; Psalm 35:13) or divine revelation (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9; Daniel 9:3; 10:3) or to seek the Lord's favor (Judges 20:26; 2 Chronicles 20:3) (Myers, 377).

The only fasting required by Jewish law had to do with the observance of the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29-31; 23:27). In at least one instance, God also commanded

fasting as an act of contrition (Joel 2:12)—but added, "Rend your hearts and not your garments" (Joel 2:13)—in other words, keep your contrition a private matter ("rend your hearts") rather than showing an outward display of contrition (rending garments). I attended a synagogue service before I was ordained and was so impressed by the weeping that happened in the synagogue on the Day of Atonement. No such grief for sins have I ever seen in a church, though our sins are surely just as great.

In a situation much akin to Matthew 6, Verses 16-18, the people of Israel

complained that they had fasted and God had not noticed. God responded that their fasting had been self-serving (Isaiah 58:3-4).

God added, "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" (Isaiah 58:6-7).

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We fast to let go of our hungers for our daily necessities, gifts of our good and

gracious God. But we also fast to let go of our hungers for those things which draw us away from God and lead us to use the people around us as means to obtain things we should not want. We pray to come into the presence of God and to share that presence and his compassion and love with those in great need of him. But we also pray to remind ourselves that we are not the Creator but his creature. We give of God's gifts to us that we might grow more daily in our trust of God's continuing goodness. But we also give that we might be drawn more to love him who loved us so much he gave his life for us.

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>>Both Holy Scripture and the accumulated spiritual insight of our tradition tell us that the classical and ancient disciplines of prayer, fasting and giving are powerful helps as we hear and move toward obeying God's call to return. They are universally recognized ways of keeping our journey moving in the right direction.

Jesus commands these three, and he goes the extra step of insisting not only that we practice them, but also that we do so privately – indeed, secretly. By the way,

Jesus is being quite straightforward here, quite literal. God simply ignores the actions of those who deliberately attract attention to their religious deeds.

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We have to start by noting that the ashes are not for God. We're not trying to show God something by wearing ashes on our foreheads. In Isaiah, God says it clearly: What I want from you is not sackcloth and ashes. I don't want you sitting around looking miserable. I want you to get up and do something. Something good. Feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. House the homeless. Give to the poor. Change the

world. That's the kind of religious offering God is looking for.

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Consider prayer. Prayer concerns our relationship with God; prayer is when we allow God to engage us. Insofar as we are praying and our prayer is true, then we simply cannot believe that the world is ours to run. Prayer takes us away from a false sense of responsibility that can turn us into driven people. The frame for our prayer is always that petition from the Lord's Prayer: "Thy will be done." We are free to rest, to rest in God.

Consider fasting. Fasting concerns our relationship with ourselves, as we are creatures of body as well as soul, flesh as well as spirit. Fasting from food or alcohol, television or shopping, makes us less dependent on those things. When fasting, we don't claim to run the world, we allow some emptiness in ourselves and invite God to fill that emptiness with divine life. Not so much energy as usual is spent digesting, consuming, analyzing. We are free to rest, to rest in God.

The third practice is almsgiving. This means giving of what we have to meet the needs of people who otherwise would go

without. Almsgiving concerns our relationship with other people and all of creation. It is a practical expression of God's justice. When we give alms, we admit that we are not owners, but trustees: trustees of our possessions, our time, our lives. We're not running the world, because the world is not ours to run. Together with everyone else, we are recipients of mercy. We are free to rest, to rest in God.

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We hear Jesus' admonition, "Don't lay up treasures for yourselves on the earth" (v. 19a). There are very few things that we

enjoy more than stored up treasures. We collect stamps, coins, crystal, china, and figurines of many varieties. We collect money in the form of cash, certificates of deposit, stocks, bonds, or precious metals. We collect real estate, academic degrees, jewelry, paintings, and sports trophies. We even collect adventures and travels. We do these things for several reasons: to guarantee our security, to feel superior to other people, and to gain praise. However, God would call us to trust God instead to guarantee our security, to acknowledge God's superiority, and to give God our praise.

One irony is that the more valuable our collection, the more vulnerable we are to loss and the more anxious we tend to be concerning the collection's vulnerability.

Another irony is that the more valuable our collection, the more anxious we are to enlarge it. Materials possessions are like an addictive substance—a little bit only whets our appetite and no amount is ever enough.

And then there is the matter of our mortality. We might live a few more decades or a few more hours—nobody knows. When death overtakes us, we will

no longer be able to enjoy our possessions or control what happens to them. A son or daughter who inherits our lifetime savings might be tempted to try to turn a small fortune into a great fortune at the gaming tables—or to waste it in any number of ways. Even wealthy people who establish charitable foundations lose control. I have often heard of foundations giving money to questionable causes and wondered how the benefactor would feel if he/she only knew. The phrase, "He/She would turn over in their grave" comes to mind.

"and where thieves break through and steal" (v. 19c). If we were to leave large amounts of money or jewels lying about, we would expect a thief to notice. The astounding thing is that thieves strip metal guardrails from the sides of highways and cut down copper wiring or invade unoccupied houses to get copper pipe to sell for scrap (one of our unoccupied rectories in New Jersey was stripped of all the copper pipes in its basement running to and from the furnace and water heater), and they pry off and sell bronze plaques affixed to church walls. They smash expensive windows to steal trinkets. (I came home one day past

Tiffany's in New York where thieves had carried out a robbery. The owners rewarded the staff for not getting hurt, and the first thing they did was to have a party for the employees right there in the store!)

Hackers threaten our finances and our secrets. Our society spends billions of dollars on locks, security cameras, armed guards, and a host of other protections, but thieves continue to break through and steal.

"But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consume, and where thieves don't break through and steal" (v. 20). Treasure in

heaven provides the kind of security that people fail to achieve through treasure on earth. The guardian of our treasure in heaven is not a lock that can be picked or a security guard who can be bribed, or a clever password, but God. No threat can breach the security that God provides to treasures stored in heaven.

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The question then is how we can store up treasure in heaven?

In a Chinese Christian funeral a priest friend of mine from Hong Kong and I did for her Chinese mother, in the presence of many of her Buddhist sisters, we learned too

late that an ‘eternal’ gift in the eyes of Buddhists was stuffing money inside the coffin that was headed to the crematorium. The closed coffin was opened as soon as the Christian funeral service ended and the two of us had gone to change our vestments, and away the hearse went to the crematorium. But that is not the Christian view, to stuff our coffins with money. [As it turns out, fake money is sold for the purpose of funerals.]

However, a careful reading of the Gospels will help us to understand how to accumulate heavenly treasure. In chapter 6,

Jesus promises that God will reward the person who gives alms in secret (v. 4), and who prays in secret (v. 6), and who fasts in secret (v. 18).

In chapter 5 Jesus gives a list of virtues that bring blessings from God—being poor in spirit (5:3), mourning (5:4), meekness (5:5), hungering and thirsting for righteousness (5:6), showing mercy (5:7), being pure in heart (5:8), being peacemakers (5:9), and suffering persecution for righteousness' sake (5:10-11). It would seem appropriate to count these as giving towards the heavenly treasury.

It would seem appropriate to count these blessings as the equivalent of treasures in heaven.

To the man who had many possessions, Jesus said: "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (19:21).

In his vision of the judgment of the nations (25:31-46), Jesus promises rewards to those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the person

who is in prison (25:35-36). He describes such people as righteous (25:37), and says to them, "Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (25:34).

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (v. 21). We love that in which we invest our treasure. One way to learn to love God, then, is to invest our treasure in God's service. As we contemplate how we might do that, we must favor a broad definition of the word treasure. Our treasure is more than money or material possessions. It includes our time, our

talents, and anything that is near and dear to our hearts. A person who loves music can produce music to the glory of God. A person who loves carpentry can use his/her carpentry skills to the glory of God, and so on.

So on this day of fasting and prayer, we are to hold close our feelings of being more religious than the next person, and instead be reconcilers in the world, pitying and serving our downtrodden neighbor in need, and offering our money and time and talent generously to help the poor and oppressed. For by these things, we will gain treasure in heaven. Amen.

A 2016 LifeWay poll found that only 2 out of 3 Americans believe they are sinners and over half of those who think they are sinners think they are able to overcome sin.

David Kalas

I had a coworker tell me the other day about a problem she was having with her computer. She had fiddled and fussed, trying different things to get the program she was using to work properly. Then, finally, she decided to turn her machine off and back on again, and -- voila! -- everything worked splendidly.

I have a missionary friend who has spent most of his adult life in India working as a missionary-educatorpastor. He once told me that he was visiting a church in the states during Lent and had made an impassioned plea for support of the mission work of the whole church. At the end of the meeting the women asked him what they might do to be of help. He suggested that since it was Lent they might practice some self-denial and for that year (this dates the story), do without a new Easter hat and give the money to missions. After long and serious debate the women adopted a motion to "go ahead and

buy new Easter hats but to give an equal amount to missions."

Such is life in the church.

Most of us sacrifice comfortably. I once remember a preacher admonishing his congregation to give to a cause until it hurts. A Bishop who was present suggested that it would be better if they gave until it helped.

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the original Lenten charge is this one by Arthur Carl Lichtenberger, which appeared

in his 1964 book *The Day Is at Hand*. Feel free to use, adapt, write your own, or have church members create their own best version for a holy and life-giving Lent.

Fast from criticism, and feast on praise.

Fast from self-pity, and feast on joy.

Fast from ill-temper, and feast on peace.

Fast from resentment, and feast on contentment.

Fast from jealousy, and feast on love.

Fast from pride, and feast on humility.

Fast from selfishness, and feast on service.

Fast from fear, and feast on faith.

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