

Treasures in Heaven

Ash Wednesday 2/25/09

[Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21](#)

Today's gospel lesson is particularly interesting. Jesus begins by talking about how there are 'religious' people who are very interested in drawing attention to themselves while they are serving God. Those who prayed loud public prayers and literally sounded trumpets when giving alms to the poor seemed to be more interested in receiving attention than doing good works. Even when performing what appears to be the private task of fasting, it seems the synagogue leaders would make sure others knew of their sacrifice. Recognition and attention seemed to consume their lives – they were laying up treasures on earth.

This evening we celebrate Ash Wednesday. Through the act of receiving ashes, we are reminded that God formed humankind from dust – nothing glamorous about it. God took

the basic stuff of the earth and created human beings in God's image. We are reminded that everything we have comes from God – our gifts, our substance, our very being comes from our creator. Ashes to ashes – dust to dust.

Ash Wednesday also marks the beginning of Lent. Lent did not exist in Jesus' time. There is no commandment to celebrate Lent. The season of Lent actually began with the early church. It began as a 40-hour fast and was expanded to a 7-day fast that led up to Easter – the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This was the original Holy Week. It eventually became a 40-day event to commemorate Jesus' 40-day trial in the wilderness. While many no longer fast the entire 40 days, it is still fairly popular to give up something during Lent as a way to remember in a small way Jesus' sacrifice for us.

What are some popular things people give up for Lent? I have heard of giving up red meat on Fridays, giving up fried foods, sweets, or dare I say it, chocolate! Some still fast during specific times of Lent. A popular time is from Good Friday to Easter Sunday morning, while we watch and wait on the resurrection of Jesus. The idea is to use the time of fasting to spend time in prayer and meditation. At times it is simply listening for God's guidance in our lives. It is a time of cleansing and renewal – to store up treasures in heaven.

We use many tools to remember special events in our lives. These days we have cameras and video recorders to immortalize moments in our lives. As a world we now have services like CNN that commemorate critical events in our history. The early church did not have such conveniences. A popular way to remember was to retrace the steps of Jesus as he walked the path

that led to the cross. Some actions are reenacted, such as communion, in order to experience and remember and appreciate Jesus' sacrifice for us. Some of you may have participated in something known as the Stations of the Cross, where different aspects of Jesus life, death, and resurrection are actually played out to help us try and experience a taste of what was given for us. That is actually a ritual that dates back all the way to the early church.

Lent is a time to renew our spiritual selves. Our physical bodies give us many clues to indicate it needs rest. At times we may find ourselves ill or recovering from an injury – these times are sometimes true eye openers for us to take better care of our bodies. Our mental health can also come to light when we have stressed ourselves out to the breaking point. Maybe you too have gotten to a point where you cannot absorb one more thing –

your brain is fried and you have to take a mental time out. Our spiritual selves can be easily placed out of our attention span. If we spend all our energy concentrating on our physical and mental health, we could easily overlook our spiritual health. This third part of our existence needs attention too. We need to store up treasures in heaven.

I encourage you to spend time in reflection during the Lenten season. It is roughly six weeks from now until Easter. Perhaps now is a good time to study God's word for us. Find a devotional to use to help you exercise your spiritual body. Let us make time to pray, seeking God's guidance for our lives. Let us join together in the activities during this Lenten season.

Perhaps we could spend some time fasting and praying for our community, our church, our nation, and our world. Perhaps we could spend some time listening for God's calling – often God

does not come in the thunder and lightning but in the still, small voice. What does God want us to do for our neighbors? How can we best serve God while serving others? May God continue to work through us as humble servants – ready to lend a helping hand without expecting a return investment. Let us lay aside treasures in heaven. Amen.