

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
St. Marks's – February 14, 2024
Ash Wednesday
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Feed the good

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.

"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."

Feed the good

Our Father in Heaven wants our heart. He sent Jesus to help us give it to Him.

A few days ago we read about God confirming Jesus to be his Son. He did this as Jesus' being became the embodiment of light and all of it was witnessed by Elijah and Moses of the Old Covenant and Peter, John, and James of the New Covenant looking on.

In that reading a few days ago Peter wanted to make the visitation of Elijah and Moses permanent by building each a dwelling and he wanted to make one for Jesus as well. Peter hadn't yet learned that nothing on Earth is permanent. Peter had not yet learned that the riches represented in Elijah, Moses, and Jesus are held in Heaven. Permanently present in life eternal.

We too seem to have trouble learning that nothing on Earth is permanent. We say things like, "nothing lasts forever", and "you can't take it with you", but when it comes to living our lives we don't always act like we believe it.

We hold onto things. Pursue earthly desires and ignore the many opportunities there are to grow closer to God. We hold onto things instead of clinging to Jesus.

Lent is the time we set aside each year to give attention and effort to living into the true fact that the comforts and riches on Earth are not what matter. What really matters is what we do in our life that pleases God. It is those things that are counted in Heaven.

Lent is the time we set aside to encourage ourselves to let God fill our lives. That scary time of giving up ourselves to God or at least trying to.

Lent is a time we strive to walk more closely and more consistently with Jesus. Reading scripture, Bible studies, and prayer are a few of the important practices that draw us closer to Jesus.

Our lectionary, that calendar of scripture readings given to us by our larger church, lays out scripture readings for each day in Lent. Readings that are meant to teach us about Jesus. Readings that are meant to focus our minds each day on what Jesus did when he walked the Earth, what he felt, what matters to him, and how he wants us to treat each other.

Inviting God to come and fill our lives can only happen when we are ready to extend that invitation. It can only happen when we make room in our lives for more time with God and doing that takes effort.

Lenten disciplines, as they are sometimes referred to, are often focused on giving something up and since it is usually only for the season of Lent it's really more like setting something aside than actually giving it up.

Some abstain from chocolate or alcohol both of which take exerting discipline over our own desires. For some it is limiting time spent on watching sports, reading novels, or taking a break from social media. Each of these disciplines accomplishes the goal of freeing up some time in our lives.

How much time do we spend on things that really aren't important? What might giving up an hour a day of one or more of those things make possible in our lives?

After freeing up a bit more time our next decision is how we might spend that time and what might our new activities produce.

This is where the riches in heaven come in. How we spend our time is a serious subject. Serious because we are responsible for what part of ourselves we choose to feed.

Something to consider this Lent is adding something to our lives. Something that will draw us closer to God and there are many possibilities.

Some of the practices I've encountered over the years are:

- 1) Reading the Bible every day and attending a regular Bible study
- 2) Consciously engaging in Christian community.
- 3) Listening regularly to a podcast that teaches about the life of Christ
- 4) Praying daily
- 5) Reading morning, noonday, or evening prayer, or at night, Compline every day

The list goes on. There are countless ways to spend more time with God. Look for ways to feed the good inside of you and then do it.

There's a story often attributed to the Cherokee people. It's referred to as, The Tale of Two Wolves and it goes like this:

A grandfather talking to his grandson tells of two wolves fighting within him. He says that one is evil, filled with anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, and every other negative emotion.

The other, he tells his grandson, is filled with only positive feelings. This wolf is filled joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.

These two wolves are in a great fight. They are fighting to the death and only one will survive.

Then the grandfather looks at his grandson and says, “the same fight is going on inside of you and every other person, too.”

The young man looks at his grandfather and asks, “which wolf will win?” The grandfather answers, “The one you feed.”

Lent is about treasuring the things of God and rejecting the things of Satan. Lent is about feeding the part of ourself that strives to be like Jesus. The part of ourself that strives to do better.

Today we are reminded that our bodies are dust and to dust we shall return. Today we are reminded that there is nothing permanent on Earth. Every bit of it will pass away. Every bit of it including each of us.

Peter hadn't yet learned that truth at the time of the Transfiguration, but he did learn it at some point, just as we have or will. We remember, as Peter finally did, that we are dust and to dust we will return.

Our Easter celebration that will come in just a short time from now affirms that while our bodies will return to dust our souls will not. Jesus conquered death and we who cling to him gain life eternal.

If we have a Holy Lent as we are called to do a lot will happen between now and Easter morning. A lot will happen between each of us and God. We will be drawn closer to Jesus, to the Spirit, to our Father in Heaven as we examine ourselves and take steps to feed the good that was planted in each of us long ago.

The good planted by God. Feed the good.