

Ash Wednesday  
2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10;  
Matthew 6:1-6; 16-19  
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### Ash Wednesday

“Store up for yourselves treasure in heaven; For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” During some difficult times in my life, after I survived the struggle or after I had helped one of my sons through a difficult situation, my mother would say, “You earned another star in your crown in heaven.” What she meant, was that having survived a difficult situation God has blessed me by carrying me through a difficult situation; or that I had done a good deed for another person. Maybe you have used similar words to help someone better understand that what they did was a gift for someone else and surely God will bless the do-gooder with a blessing, to counter balance the bad done. Unfortunately, it isn't the good deeds we do earn treasure for us in heaven. It isn't in the actions we do for each others. It is only the deeds and actions that are within our heart that earn treasure in heaven.

I'm sure you have heard a similar tale that you might as well use what you got here, because you can't take it with you when you die! We seem to gather so much stuff in our lives that our possessions become our treasure. I bet some of you would love to take your treasured possessions with you when you die. The ancient pharaohs were buried in tombs that were surrounded by precious gems and artifacts. It was believed these treasures would be useful in the afterlife. But what would you do with it anyway when you get to heaven? God certainly has all of our needs covered in heaven. Then again, we hear God provides everything we need while on earth.

In our society we are surrounded by advertisements to purchase this good or service to enhance our lives. Our lives are filled with material possessions that if we really thought about it, have no real value to us. Sure they look good sitting around the house, but does it really give us life. I am no different than any of you when it comes to having material goods. When I moved to Philadelphia almost two years ago, I moved from a four bedroom house, living room, formal dining room, family room, two bathrooms into a two room apartment. Yes, every room in the house was filled with stuff. There were things I wanted to keep, but quite a bit of it was sold or given away. Ironically, since living in Philadelphia, I realize I can live without all that other stuff surrounding me. Life seems simpler.

What Matthew is telling us in this passage of scripture is that instead of filling our lives with the material goods of life, it is better for us to fill our lives with material of the heart. In other words, care for yourselves by loving others, by caring for those in need and not just those people you know, but for all God's people. Yes, the thought of that can be overwhelming because all of us can identify persons in need. God doesn't ask us to care for everyone for we are not alone in doing God's work. We are to take little steps, start with one person. Statistics indicate if we are to make a change in the way society deals with its ills, it starts with one

person or family. Making changes to the structure of a social program without changing the people in the program only continues the cycle of poverty. To break that cycle you start by helping one person see their need and support them to a new beginning.

Today we begin our journey in Lent. Lent is a time of reflection, a time of repentance, a time of taking stock of God's presence. In Epiphany we saw how Jesus as the light of God guides our lives, opens our eyes to see. We heard stories of how Jesus brings this light to others. Now, we are called to take time to reflect on that light and how it shines through us. Last Sunday we heard Jesus tell Peter, James and John to not tell anyone that he is the Son of God, until after he has risen from the dead. Until that time comes, we look within ourselves to evaluate Jesus within each of us. Only after, he has risen from the dead are we to go out and tell the world of the joy of having Jesus in our hearts. The first section of our scripture text today advises us not to be a show off of our intentions. This is what Jesus was trying to say to Peter, James, and John. Jesus knew they would want to go out and tell the world what they saw, but Jesus informs them, they do not have all the details yet. Be patient, wait. There is more to come. Don't shout it from the mountaintop...yet. It sounds like Jesus is taking their voice away from them. Jesus is aware that what they say may not be advisable.

Here we are at the beginning of Lent. Many people will 'give up' something for Lent as a way of showing their repentance to God. Maybe you will swear off eating chocolate or coffee or buying lottery tickets or you fill in the blank.... About two or three weeks into Lent you will begin to say, "I can't wait till Easter. I am dying for chocolate or coffee or maybe my luck will change with a lottery ticket." My question for us is, "Is giving up these things during Lent REALLY showing repentance to God, if on Easter Day we return to our previous indulgences?" Did we really make a change in our lives by not consuming chocolate or coffee or lottery tickets? I am not sure by giving up such items we truly envelop the meaning of Lent.

What if instead of giving up something for Lent, we gave something away for Lent? What if instead of eating chocolate we took a family struggling to make ends meet out for lunch or dinner? What if instead of drinking coffee we took a homeless person to a local shelter for a night? What if instead of buying lottery tickets we used those monies to support an employment service that helps to find work for the unemployed? What if instead of waiting for Easter to arrive in six weeks anxious to stop our 'giving up' we continue to give to others? I believe this is what we are called to 'give up' for Lent. To give up the things that bog us down and give ourselves to each other; a change of heart, a repentant heart for not seeing how others are suffering in our world. And then after the Son of Man has risen from the dead continue to do as we are able; to share the whole story of Jesus with others.

Maybe you don't know where to start. Start with prayer. Be in conversation with God who will lead you to a place where you can witness the needs of others. There are places and agencies in our neighborhood that are keenly aware of the needs of the community. You do not have to go out on our own and figure it out. There are people helping people every day in our community. If you are not associated with such an agency, try the Colonial Neighborhood Council, or the Welcome Center in Norristown, or the Interfaith Network on Germantown

Avenue or Lutheran Settlement House. Literally hundreds of people are served by varied services offered by these established agencies.

These are difficult times for all of us. Our economy is weak. Some are not sure where their next meal will come from or where they will sleep tonight or if there will be enough money to pay the mortgage. No one is asking you to give beyond your means. God who is faithful and just provides for all. Maybe you cannot provide financial resources, but sometimes money is not what is needed. Maybe all that is needed is a personal note, a phone call, time spent with someone – taking time to begin or rekindle a relationship with another person. These are the treasures Matthew is encouraging us to build up. These are the treasures that God will recognize in heaven. When we take care of God's people with these treasures, there your heart will be also.