

3.2.2022 Ash Wednesday

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Joel 2:12-, 12-17; Ps. 51; 2 Cor. 5:20b-6:10; Mt. 6:1-6, 16-21

“Having nothing, yet possessing everything”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Today on Ash Wednesday, Christians around the world begin a season of giving, prayer and fasting. In today’s gospel, Jesus talks about giving, prayer and fasting as three things we do that the Father sees and rewards in secret. Giving, prayer and fasting are the discipline of Lent. As a further sign of our Lenten discipline, the imposition of ashes reminds us of our mortality – that we were born with nothing, and that we will die with nothing.

In our consumer world we are constantly told we need to possess greater and greater material wealth, success and achievement in order for our lives to have meaning. We are bombarded daily with this message about possessing more and consuming more. During Lent we remember that we are born with nothing and we will die with nothing, but that in Christ we already possess everything. This is the core message of Jesus: that in giving, in prayer, and in fasting we store up treasure in heaven. And where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Lent is a time to return to God and to a simpler life that centers upon God alone. The world, with its relentless advertising, politics, nationalisms, and cultures of wealth and success, will never tell us that the secret to life is in giving, praying and fasting.

All of us know the feeling of going on vacation and being liberated from many of life’s cares. Who hasn’t gone away for vacation and said, “It was like heaven, no phone, no work emails, no grocery shopping, no appointments, etc. etc.” Lent is a bit like this, only much better; it is a spiritual time away from the world, while still being very much concerned about the world. Lent is not an escape from the world; Lent is an alternative and better way of living in the world through giving, praying and fasting.

During Lent, we are invited to give to God and to our neighbor out of our abundance, rather than spending and consuming only for ourselves. During Lent, we are invited to pray for the concerns of the world and for our neighbor, rather than for ourselves. We are invited to fast, realizing how little we actually need to live. In doing so, we remind ourselves how little many in the world actually have.

During Lent, we can give toward the church, toward our community, and toward the world and its needs. We can give from our financial resources and we can give of our time for others.

During Lent, we are encouraged to pray above and beyond our normal prayer life. What concerns, people and issues need your prayers each day and throughout the day? Lent is a time to turn off our technology and spend more time in the spiritual space and quiet of prayer.

During Lent, fasting means not feeding our appetites for more. Of course, this can mean eating more simply, but it can also mean fasting from consuming as we are told by the world. It might mean giving more to food pantries and soup kitchens, a reminder that for many, each day is spent in hunger.

The discipline of Lent is a challenge, and usually takes a few days to establish its own rhythm. After a while, we realize we have more than enough, and gradually we rediscover the joy of sharing our abundance with others. During Lent, what will you give? What will you pray for? What will you fast from?

In today's second reading, Paul describes life in God's grace – he speaks of living “*by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech and the power of God.*”

Paul also writes of the challenges that early Christians faced, “*hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, and hunger.*” Early Christians did not enjoy many of the freedoms we do today, especially religious and political freedoms. Yet as Paul writes, they were “*dying and yet alive.*” Paul understood that with Christ he already possessed everything that would save him from sin and death.

During Lent, we realize again that in following Jesus, we will seem poor by the world's standards, yet our love, expressed in giving, praying and fasting, will make many rich in the Spirit. To follow Christ is to live as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

During Lent I encourage you to ask yourself, “Where is my heart, and where is my treasure? What do I really need to live, and what is essential in my life? If I had to flee because of hardship or calamity, what would I take? If I could take nothing, would I already possess everything?”

During Lent, I encourage you to ask, “How can I give, pray and fast?” How can I give, pray and fast to help Christ's church, to help my neighbor here and across the world? How can I work for peace in the world, in my local community, and across the world? How can I remember the people of Ukraine in giving and in prayer? How can I fast from life's luxuries, discovering the treasure of heaven?

During Lent, I encourage you to ask yourself, “Where is my heart, and where is my treasure?” Live as if you have nothing, and live as if you already possess everything in Christ. Amen.