

2.22.2023 Ash Wednesday

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 52:1-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

“Rend your hearts”

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

The prophet Joel’s words, “*Rend your hearts and not your clothing...Return to the Lord, your God,*” describe the Lenten journey. The journey of forty days to Good Friday and Easter Sunday is a journey of the heart, of returning to God’s steadfast love. The Lenten journey is a time to look deeply into our hearts, where we meet God and where we each meet our true self.

In today’s gospel, Jesus is describing a way of being – which is a way of giving, a way of prayer, and a way of living with less so that we might experience the abundant treasure of God in our hearts and in the lives of others. Like the prophet Joel, Jesus is asking us to pay attention to what goes on in our hearts.

Jesus says, “*Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*” We have been created to know and love God, and the human heart is and should be, a storehouse of divine treasure. Jesus describes giving to those in need, the life of prayer, and a life of fasting – or living with less – as three ways we are seen by God.

Jesus describes the ways human beings often wrongly approach giving, praying and fasting. In the example of giving, Jesus is really addressing the temptation of human pride to self-advertising and self-gratification. Are we people who give, but make a lot of noise about our giving, saying, “Look at me and all that I give and do for others!” The world is filled with public buildings and even chapels that prominently display the name of some benefactor, and we have all seen, or been included in lists of donors with prestigious names like “the Founders Circle,” “the Century Circle,” or the “Trustees Club,” with the amounts of gifts prominently displayed for all to see. Could you give toward something and remain anonymous with your gift?

Jesus’ words, “*do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,*” are not of course, meant to be taken literally, because our hands are not independent of one another. What Jesus is asking is, “Are you able to make your offerings to God and your charitable giving with such confidentiality and self-denial that it seems as if you are wholly unaware of your good gifts to God and to others? In other words, are you able to deny yourself, rending your heart by seeking to become anonymous and invisible in this world? Jesus says we are to do these things “in secret,” in our hearts, so that God who sees us in secret will reward us not with financial gain or accolades,

but with the treasure of heaven deposited in our hearts.

Jesus goes on to describe people who are again very noisy about their prayer or spiritual life. Jesus' description of people who love to stand in the middle of the crowd, or on the street corner, is easy to understand in contemporary terms. We are surrounded by people who shout out their thoughts and views on everything from politics to religion, on the modern-day street corners of television and social media. Jesus encourages us to be discreet in our prayer and public life by going into the private space of our hearts to converse with God.

Again, Jesus takes up the topic of fasting, or living with less. Modern day religious fasting may be rare, but the religious zeal with which modern people often talk of dieting, detoxing, and cleansing, is again the temptation to pride. In this materialistic and success-driven world, can we keep our fasting and living with less to ourselves? Modern people rend their bodies amidst a culture of exercise penance and dieting repentance, yet are we also able to rend our hearts with similar zeal, so that our fasting is not seen by others?

Jesus is asking us to pay attention to what goes on in our hearts. He is describing a life of giving, prayer, and fasting in which we seek to deny what the world expects of us so that we might encounter our true self, allowing God's grace to fill us again and again. It is when we realize that all we possess is really nothing, that we gain everything. Are you prepared to leave this world with nothing but the treasure of heaven stored in our heart?

The words of Ash Wednesday, "*Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return,*" were spoken by God to Adam. These words are a reminder of our impermanence and our mortality. All of us will die. After you are gone, someone else will gain your job title, or occupy your seat in a company, or on a prestigious board. Some else may live in your house. How will you be remembered after you are gone? Will you have stored up the treasure of heaven in your heart? In the midst of the world's noise and a culture of self-advertising, God's words to Adam reveal the truth about ourselves: "*Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.*"

The most important things of life are small and unseen, selfless acts of charity and love for others that expect nothing in return, the works of justice done when no one is looking. The "room" that Jesus speaks of is also the "room" of your heart. It is a holy place of quiet sanctuary and prayer. Your heart is the place where you will encounter God and where you will encounter your true self. Guard the entrance to your heart, and remember that you are dust.

Rending our hearts leads to a way of living that Paul describes as "*purity, knowledge, patience,*

*kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech – as having nothing yet possessing everything.*” The path toward union with God begins in your heart with self-denial and nothingness. In realizing that we truly have nothing, God fills us with everything we need for living.

Jesus emptied himself of human grasping at power and authority, so that filled with the power of the Spirit at his baptism, he might live for others. Lent is the invitation to empty ourselves of all that stands in the way of God and service to others. Lent is about paying attention to what goes on in our hearts.

Life is brief. *“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”* Will you know your true self better in forty days? Encounter yourself not in the things of this world, but again as dust, as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

Rend your hearts. *“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* Amen.