

2.14.2024 Ash Wednesday

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17; 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 words of Jesus about giving, praying, and fasting highlight three aspects of the Lenten journey. Prayer is an important part of the Christian life. To help us take time for prayer Lenten Devotional Booklets are available in the Gathering Place. Make time during Lent to pray for concerns on your heart, your neighbor, and all who suffer in this world. Giving is also an important part of Lent. This year our Lenten Box offerings will go to Refugee Support Services for Infant Care Kits by helping newly arrived refugee families with newborn infants. Please use the Lenten Boxes to welcome the littlest strangers in our community. Fasting is also central to the Lenten discipline, by fasting from the ways of this world that rob us of our closeness God. On Wednesday evenings during Lent, I encourage you to take time for table fellowship and evening prayer.

Jesus’ words about giving, prayer, and fasting actions point to the inward and secret place of the human heart. The prophet Joel’s words center upon this intangible place of the heart. Joel calls us to a rending of our hearts rather than our outward clothing and appearance. Joel writes, “*Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing.*”

Lent is and has always been concerned with the inward journey of the human heart returning to God. As Psalm 51 reminds us, “*You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.*” The heart is that place of God’s intangible truth and wisdom at work in our lives. The psalmist speaks of the human heart as a secret place within us, as the place in which we come to know God’s truth and wisdom.

Though the season of Lent is only a brief forty days, the prophets, the Psalms, and words of Jesus all seek to focus our entire lives and our lifetimes to being vigilant about our inward lives and God’s secret place in our hearts.

Yet to many, religious matters and inward things of the heart, seem less and less important today. In contrast, easily quantifiable and tangible products, goods, and services, are valued for their profitability and market share. We seem to be captivated evermore by the screens of our phones, devices, computers, and televisions rather than looking inward upon our hearts. We spend more time with our technology than we do opening our eyes and looking within.

We know the good we should do, and yet don't do it. Rather, we spend our time and resources looking to and supporting people, ideologies, and institutions rather than seeking to listen to the God who speaks out of silence, urging us to prophetic action in this world.

The prophet Joel's words seem more relevant than ever: "*Spare your people, O Lord, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'*" Considering all of today's problems many may ask, "Where is God?" We grope for answers. We grope for peace, for unity, for compassion, for our humanity in the face of our inhuman thoughts and actions. The question, "*Where is God?*" is a question many may ask in war torn places like Ukraine, Gaza, and Sudan: "How can human beings do this to one another?" And in our own nation, we judge people more by the outward appearances of their nationality, ethnicity, gender, and identity than by the content of their hearts and lives. We are beguiled by those who speak words of division, vengefulness, and confusion, rather than listening to those who are prophets of peace, unity, and wisdom. We prefer noise and fury to the God who comes in silence and peace. What we say and do often reveals the content of our hearts as sinful, broken, and lost.

Lent is about realizing that the invaluable treasure of our lives exists within us already. The heart is the intangible place where God continues to speak to us. On Ash Wednesday, we remember that God exists in the intangible and secret place of the human heart. We remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return. All we create, believe, hope for, and say and do have their origins in the secret and divine place of the human heart.

There is an aspect of Japanese law that has fascinated me. This law is designated by the name: "Important Intangible Cultural Property" (重要無形文化財). What fascinates me about this law is that it protects intangible cultural treasures such as performing arts like Noh drama and Kabuki theatre, traditional musical instruments, as well as art traditions such as ceramics, textiles, and lacquerware. There is a provision in this law that designates living artisans who teach and hand down these traditions as "Living National Treasures" (人間国宝). These are people who create out of the treasure of their hearts.

As I reflect about Ash Wednesday, I am struck by the amount of attention paid by the biblical texts to matters of the human heart. The biblical witness through the prophets and Jesus acknowledges the broken reality of our hearts and of this world. We have laws for everything, and yet we break them. As Paul writes, we know the good we should do and yet we do not do it. The

Prophet Joel speaks of this, writing, *“Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing.”*

The discipline of Lent encourages us to understand that the outward things of this world depend upon the intangible treasure of our hearts. Psalm 51 invites us into the Lenten journey with words of petition to God, *“You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.”*

I encourage you to practice the discipline of Lent as you give, pray, and fast from this world. Doing so, your Father who sees into you secret heart will reward you in secret. The discipline of Lent helps us see what is truly valuable by recognizing our spiritual poverty. Paul describes this, writing, *“As always rejoicing, as poor, yet making many rich; as possessing nothing, and yet possessing everything.”*

O, to be a living treasure yet be unaware of it! Allow the treasure of God to guide your heart for *“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* To be a living treasure is to seemingly possess nothing and yet in Christ, to already possess everything. Possessing treasure in our hearts, we live for others, inspire others, and offer others hope in a broken world.

These forty days, take the journey of Lent. Rend your hearts and not your clothing. Pay attention to the intangible and secret treasure of your hearts.

Give, pray, and fast. You have been created to be a living treasure for others. With the treasure of Christ in your hearts, you will become living treasure for others.

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