

2.18.2026 Ash Wednesday

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 51:1-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

“Where is your treasure?”

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

Today we begin the Lenten 40-day journey of giving, prayer and fasting. These three, “Give, Pray, Fast” are the three disciplines of the Christian life that Jesus identifies in today’s gospel. Today, Jesus again encourages us to see these three as treasures leading to heaven. “Give, Pray, Fast” is not simply a checklist of more things to do – a punch-list to accomplish that will get us into heaven.

I am happy to see all of you here today. It never surprises me, however, that attendance on Ash Wednesday service is far lower than, for example, Christmas Eve. This reminds me of the words of Thomas à Kempis in his book, *The Imitation of Christ*.

Jesus has many who love his Kingdom of Heaven, but few who will carry His Cross. He has many who desire comfort, but few who desire suffering. He finds many to share His feasts, but few his fasting. Many want to rejoice with Him, but few will stay by Him. Many follow Jesus to the breaking of bread, but few will drink the cup of His suffering. Many admire His miracles, but few will follow him to the ignominy of the cross. Many love Jesus as long as no hardship touches them (Penguin, 2013 translation, p, 71).

Today Jesus reminds us that a daily life of giving, prayer and fasting is the Christian life of storing up treasure in heaven. Yet I am afraid that our daily life is cluttered with many other earthly treasures. Money, possessions, power, authority, and even relationships can all become earthly treasures that we store up for ourselves. Such earthly treasures can become idols that hinder us from reaching Jesus. Jesus is not an idea or a theological principle – Jesus is real. Yet we place so many other things ahead of him. Often, we don’t make time for him. Where is your treasure?

Today’s readings run on like a marathon, reminding us of the endurance needed to be a disciple of Jesus. Isaiah 58 lays bare our hypocrisy: we use religion to serve ourselves. In our 24/7 world, we don’t rest on the Sabbath, and we certainly don’t daily share our food and homes with the poor. Yet as Isaiah reminds us, serving others is the fast that God chooses, yet we seem incapable of fasting from the world and our appetites. Isaiah reminds us that fasting is not a passive “giving up” of something. Fasting is not meant to be centered upon “me”; but rather, fasting is how I learn to forget myself so that I might be of service others and to God. Where is your treasure?

Serving others in their poverty, weakness, and need is the only way – and I repeat – the only

way that the ancient ruins of our human society are ever rebuilt. Isaiah reminds us in very contemporary sounding words that fasting from ourselves and serving others is how we repair and restore the streets of the communities in which we live. It does not happen by force.

Psalm 51 is a prayer for forgiveness from God. *“Have mercy on me, O God...blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.”* If only we prayed like this every day and moment. Before we get to the “wish list” of things we always ask God for in our prayers, if we would only recognize that we have a deeply rooted brokenness within us that only God can heal with forgiveness.

Psalm 51 introduces the insight that we have “a secret heart” within us. *“Teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be white than snow.”* The secret heart within you is where your treasure is. Psalm 51 counsels us that *“only a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”* Where is your treasure?

There is a sense of urgency to the reading from 2 Corinthians today: *“See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!”* If not now – when? If you do not seek reconciliation with God now, then, when will you? On Ash Wednesday, Paul urges us, *“Be reconciled to God.”* The way of possessing everything is, as Paul writes, found in living “as having nothing.” On Ash Wednesday, we come face to face with our self-centered grasping after our own treasure.

The altar cross is turned during Lent to reveal the crucifix, reminding us that Jesus tells all who look to him: *“If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”* (Mt.16:24). Now is the acceptable time to deny yourself, to abandon yourself and walk with him on the way of the cross. Only in dying to yourself, will you live. Only in living as if you have nothing, will you possess everything. If not now – when will you be reconciled to God? Where is your treasure?

The ashes you have received today are a small symbol of your mortality. The ashes on your forehead are a *momento mori*, a reminder that you will also die – because we do live and carry on as if we will never die. Lent is a 40-day journey meant to help open your secret heart to God. Open your heart anew to Jesus that he might be the treasure of heaven in you.

Reaching heaven is a matter of the heart. Reaching heaven is a matter of what you treasure in your heart. When you treasure Jesus, your heart and hands are opened to your neighbor. When we treasure wealth and power our hearts are closed to others. With closed hearts, we close our hands to hold into things. Our hands are often closed, as Isaiah writes, to quarrel and *“strike with the wicked fist.”* Where is your treasure?

I have seen signs as I go past churches that read, “Ashes to go”, as if the ashes you receive

today are just another thing to check off the list while rushing around on another Wednesday. Yet if ashes are a convenience that we receive as we move on to the next thing, we will never fully encounter ourselves and our pressing need of reconciliation with God and with others.

If we never seek reconciliation with God,
we will never experience reconciliation with others.

Seek the things that are above. Seek the treasure of heaven in your heart. Only then – and only then – will we be able to restore the ruins of our world, to help rebuild cities and lives that have been reduced to ashes.

Seek the things that are above. Seek the treasure of heaven in your heart. Then you will be able to welcome your neighbor as God has welcomed you.

During Lent, give to others.

Spend time in quiet and prayer.

Fast from yourself.

Where is your treasure? Amen.