

“Be careful,” Jesus says, “not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven,” (Matt. 6:1). So many times we read in the gospels of how Jesus seems bothered by stuff – but in this evening’s gospel account, Jesus is in favor of treasures. We don’t hear Him tell us, “Stay away from treasure – it’s bad for your health!” It’s okay. The issue is what we choose to treasure. We know this, for the most part – some treasures aren’t worth storing, or piling up.

We tuck things into the attic so that when we dig it out, we say with a sigh, “What were we thinking, keeping this? The stuff around here just wears out, gets stained, and becomes unwearable. It rusts!” What do you suppose they had in Jesus’ day that rusted? The word is “brosis” in Greek, which interestingly refers to food that gets eaten. It’s consumed, used up, worn away until you can’t recognize it anymore.

Some treasures are worth treasuring, while others are fit for the junkyard. The problem we have, especially in our culture, is telling the difference. There are a lot of people in the American Church who view it from a tally sheet perspective. You have to pile up a good score to get into Heaven. They view every act of service as another star in their crown. Their goal is to get lots of stars – lots of jewels – and they sometimes get a big head because of it. Other people take the view that it’s building up different sized houses in Heaven – do little here, and you may get a room there, but do a lot, and you may get a palace.

We’re to do good works, to be sure. But we can’t earn our place in Heaven – our place there is secured only by the grace of God given to us through Jesus Christ, His Son. Stuff is stuff, though. We sometimes get fixated on the idea that in our poverty here, we’ll be blessed by unimaginable wealth and possessions there. If He’s wanting us to be selfless here, and be concerned with the well-being of our neighbors, don’t you think He would want us to do the same in His physical presence?

The stuff Jesus wants us to treasure isn’t materialistic, self-seeking stuff, in this world, or the next. It may very well be that the treasure Jesus speaks of is found in the act itself. What if He’s blessed us so we can be a blessing to others? In other passages, when Jesus shares this secret, He tells someone – the rich young man, for instance – “Sell everything and give the money to the poor, and you’ll have treasure in heaven.” We think, “We get something when we get to heaven, there will be something there because we’ve done this great thing.” Maybe we’ve gotten it wrong. He says, “Do this, and you will have...”

Go and sell and you will have your treasure. It’s in the selling and giving – that’s the treasure. Jesus tells us to store up for yourselves treasures in Heaven. Live your life in such a way that you know the blessing. Live it so that you’re treasuring what lasts into eternity. That’s what Jesus was telling the crowd – and what He’s telling us. Some treasures are eaten away, and some last – and nothing in the world can take them away.

Back in the 1960’s or 1970’s, African-American singer Shirley Caesar came out with a song titled, *This Joy That I Have, the World Didn’t Give it to Me*. I learned an adapted version of it as a teenager at church camp. The joy, hope, peace, and love that we have – the world didn’t give it, and the world can’t take it away. Jesus gave it, and we’re gonna give it away!

Small acts of kindness have the potential of having eternal impacts. Lives lived out in love toward others, lasts forever. Goodness outlasts bitterness. Joy endures, while despair fades away. Acts of generosity may be treasured for a lifetime.

The Gospel lesson tonight is in a broader passage about prayer. It’s not about putting on a show, but rather on making sure our focus is not on the outward expression. It’s about impressing God instead of humans. Jesus says the treasure is having conversation with God – or put another way, sitting in His presence. That’s what we’re called to treasure.

We’re to fast, not to punish our bodies or deny ourselves, but to give ourselves more time with God. We experience God’s best when we’re attuned, and attentive, to the presence

of the Holy Spirit with us. In other words, we're "woke" to God. I know you may not like the political ramifications of that statement, but it's better to be awake than asleep, when it comes to spending time with God. Especially when we set aside everything that the world says matters and enjoy sweet communion with Jesus Christ. Ash Wednesday is all about setting an agenda to focus on the relationship we have with God through Jesus Christ.

Ash Wednesday is about refocusing and realigning ourselves in relationship to God and to one another. We must learn to encounter our sinfulness and frailty with honesty and truth, trusting that God receives our confession – instead of focusing on shame and blame. It can be scary to cast off the stuff that seems to define a life. In doing so, there's a felt loss, to be sure. But what cannot be lost are all the moments that have been treasured together – the lives that we've lived, and the experiences we've shared. Even when we forget them, they will be ours in eternity. When we meet, we will remember – and be remembered – with Jesus, and by Him. What greater treasure could there possibly be than that?