

March 2, 2022 Ash Wednesday Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Jesus says, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them." We don't want to practice piety in order to be admired by others, it lessens the effect of what we are practicing; we are doing it, not to be pious, but in order to be seen by others. By the way, what is piety? It means "having or showing or expressing reverence for a deity." Dictionary.com says this about piety: "It as if someone is deeply religious and visibly follows all the moral and ethical codes of his religion, he is pious. Pious comes from a Latin word which means dutiful. If someone believes deeply in something, and lets everyone see it through their behavior, then they are pious." Jesus tells us not to be pious in front of others with only the intention of them noticing and thinking you are devoted; don't be pious only so that they'll notice. In today's day and age most people wouldn't want to be seen as pious. It's not a popular thing. If you practice your piety in public in today's world, unfortunately you most likely will be considered weird.

Let's talk about the word practice... piety is something that needs to be practiced. We won't ever perfect it. Practice doesn't mean that we're learning about being pious, it means we are being pious. We are praying, fasting, giving alms, meditating on God's Word. We are practicing until we get it perfect, which will never happen, so we continue to practice. So when we hear Jesus say beware of practicing your piety does that mean we are to stop meditating, stop giving, stop praying, stop fasting? Because if we are doing them for the wrong reasons, should we be doing them at all? That's being safe. And that isn't what Jesus is asking of us at all.

Self-examination and repentance, by prayer, fasting and self-denial; and reading and meditating on God's Word is the Lenten Invitation and a call to do these acts of piety. Why do we do them? Why do we practice these acts of piety? Because we will find out where our life intersects with Jesus' life. It is discovering how we store up our treasures in heaven.

Self-denial is more about getting rid of stuff that gathering it. Jesus didn't have a lot of stuff... he was constantly traveling on foot; he couldn't keep more than what he could carry with him. Yet Jesus is in favor of treasures. Treasuring is ok. It's what we choose to treasure that is the issue. We don't need to be filling up our attic or in my case our garage with useless stuff. The stuff we have there just gets stained, worn out, rusts. It's things we forgot we even own, and we wonder why we even kept it. Some treasures are worth treasuring, but some need to go into the dumpster.

How can we tell the difference?

How do we know we are saving the right things?

Treasuring the right things?

Some people say you do good acts of service to get another star in your crown and they say the goal is to have lots of stars, jewels, in your crown. Not that you can earn a place in heaven, only God's grace enables that, but so that your mansion will be bigger and better with plush carpets, more rooms, nice furniture... or so some people think. I can't agree with that because if Jesus was against too much stuff on earth why wouldn't he be against too much stuff in heaven as well?

So the treasure worth treasuring isn't stuff. The treasure is not something we can hold in our hands; it is what we do with our hands. It is the act itself.

When the rich young man asks how he can get in heaven Jesus tells him to “sell everything and give the money to the poor and you’ll have treasure in heaven.” We don’t get something because we’ve done something. It’s the selling and the giving that is the treasure. The blessing is the doing.

“Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.” Live your life in such a way that you know the blessing every day. Live your life so that you are treasuring what lasts into eternity. That’s what Jesus is trying to point out to us. Some treasure is eaten away, and some treasure lasts, and nothing in this world can take it away. An act of kindness lives forever. Love lived out lasts forever. Goodness outlasts bitterness. Joy endures, while despair fades. An act of generosity is treasured into eternity.

It's kind of frightening to eliminate the stuff that has defined our life, or at least seemed to anyway. It is a loss. But what can't be lost are the moments we've treasured together, the lives that we've lived, the experiences we've shared. Even though I imagine we will forget them, we will have all the memories in eternity. When we meet, we will remember and be remembered. And what greater treasure can there be than that?

Beware, or rather be aware of practicing your piety. Because of wrong motives, yes. But also, because by being aware, you are engaged in treasure storing. This Lent might be a time for us to practice our piety, individually and in community. It is in this doing, this practicing while we are aware of the practice, that will enable us to be gathered up into Jesus.

All glory be to God.