***“The Moth Does Not Consume”*** by Stephen Finlan at The First Church, Feb. 17, 2021

**Matthew 6:1-4, 19-21**

Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. 2So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. . .

19 ‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Welcome to the beginning of Lent. The themes of Lent are repentance, humility, rededication, and contemplation. The 40 days (plus six Sundays) of Lent are seen as parallel to Jesus’ 40 days of fasting and temptation in the desert before beginning his ministry. The end of Lent is Passion Week and Easter, so the emphasis switches from self-examination to thinking about Jesus. But now we enter a time for thoughtful attention to our spiritual lives.

The Matthew passage is an exhortation to humility and devotion. First comes the instruction to not seek to be noticed and praised for your good deeds. What about “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (Matt 6:3)? Does that mean we are supposed to be ignorant or inconsistent? It seems paradoxical. But Jesus is not being irrational. Look at the advice that surrounds that sentence, and you’ll see that it means don’t let your self-interest (left hand) take advantage of your charitable action (right hand); don’t use your good deeds to promote yourself. Let the gifting be its own reward. This goes right against what marketing and promotion experts are always telling us. They say we’ve got to toot our own horns. Jesus says there are spiritual rewards for your good deeds, but they will be “in secret” (6:4), without publicity.

If you are not to do things in order to be “praised by others” (6:2), then you will have to find a new way of living, for the world expects you to seek praise and status. Jesus does not conform to the world. His calls for a new stance in the world. He asks us *not* to promote our earthly selves and status, but to invest in our *heavenly* status.

The rewards for doing good are very real, and Jesus refers to them as “treasures.” What he points out is that you should store up treasures in *heaven* rather than on earth. Earthly treasures can fade or be stolen; they can be consumed by the moth or by rust. Spiritual treasures will never fade or decay or be stolen. The spiritual level is profoundly different from the material level.

In heaven there is no P.R. There is only S.G.—spiritual growth. It is a new way of living and interacting with others, without competition or aggression. Can we start to live that way here on earth? Can we show God’s love in our walk of life? We *can* get ahead without treading on other people. We *can* gain without taking away from other people. Do you see how different this is from materialistic living?

Lent is a time for spiritual reflection and correction. You can lean into it. If you need to give up some self-indulgence or some distraction, this is a time to do it. If you need to rethink your activities and to undertake a reform, this is the time to do that. Lent is Spring Cleaning for the soul. It culminates with Easter. And so, it includes the saddest and the happiest parts of the Gospel story.

We contemplate the life of Jesus, and we re-order our own lives. To God we say “have thine own way, Lord.” We focus on cooperating with God.

We do good in order to help others and to contribute to our own heavenly account. We incorporate heavenly principles in our lives. We ask Jesus to help us reform our lives, and we study the story of his life so that we may learn of God’s ways. Lent is ultimately about letting God in. How rich our lives are as we expand to let God in.