

Sermon – “There Your Heart Will Be”

Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2018

Scripture Readings: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 and Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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Our first reading comes from the book of the prophet Joel, and contains both warning and hope in God. Listen for God’s word to you from Joel, chapter 2, verses 1 through 2 and 12 through 17.

¹ Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near —² a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come...

¹² Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³ rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. ¹⁴ Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD, your God?

¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; ¹⁶ gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy.

¹⁷ Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep. Let them say, “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?””

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Our second reading comes to us from Matthew’s Gospel, in which Jesus is instructing his followers. Listen for the Word of the Lord to you, from Matthew 6, verses 1 through 6 and 16 through 21.

¹ “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.

² “So 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. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵ “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you...

¹⁶ “And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is 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.

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Tonight I would simply like to talk us through the scripture that we have just heard. We so often hear a reading and it passes right by us. So let’s take a little more time looking at today’s second reading directly. Let’s even define some of the words that maybe the children among us don’t know, or that we don’t use very often these days. Sometimes it is good to talk in plain, simple language and avoid going over people’s heads. Let’s see what this passage says.

The bible passage we just read together comes from the book of Matthew. These are words that Jesus spoke to a crowd. He was still early in his ministry, but he was already getting famous for curing diseases everywhere he went, and huge crowds came to see him and hear what he had to say. He spoke these particular words, along with a lot of other teachings, to people who had followed him up a mountain, and so this is part of what we call his Sermon on the Mount. Here is the part we read today again, little by little.

“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.”¹

This is the sort of sentence that seems to catch our attention mainly at the end. “[T]hen you have no reward from your Father in heaven,” we hear, and our ears suddenly perk up. Wait, what was the first part again? When don’t we have a reward? When we “[practice] our piety before others in order to be seen by them,” apparently. What does that mean? What is piety? Piety means being extremely dutiful in our religious duties. Or, in other words, it means sticking very strongly to being good.

So that means Jesus is saying God—our Father in heaven—doesn’t give us any special credit for doing good things when we do them in front of other people, to show off how good we are.

¹ Matthew 6:1 (New Revised Standard Version).

Let's see the examples Jesus gives us.

"So whenever you give alms," Jesus says, "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."²

This has a few maybe unfamiliar things in it. "Alms" are money or other gifts given to help needy people. Another similar word for that is charity. "Hypocrites" are people who say one thing but do something completely different, like a person who says nobody should ever tell a lie but who lies all the time himself. These are people who fake being good. Synagogues are kind of like churches, where Jewish people worship.

So it sounds like when Jesus was alive, there were people who went around blowing trumpets so that everyone would look over at them and see how much money they were giving away to the poor. They wanted people to be impressed, and to praise them for how generous they were. People maybe don't use trumpets for that most of the time these days, but I'm sure we have all seen plenty of people who are really proud of themselves for doing nice things, and who want to make sure everyone knows how good they were so they can get lots of attention and praise for what they did. I'm sure we have all done that sometimes ourselves, in fact.

What does Jesus say to do instead?

"But when you give alms," he says, "do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."³

He's saying not only to avoid showing off to other people. He says not to let your own left hand know what your right hand did when it gave someone a gift, like we should almost even keep it secret from ourselves when we do good things. We obviously can't really keep it a secret from ourselves, but we can act as if we did. We can try not to be proud of ourselves for it. And apparently this is more the way God wishes us to live.

Jesus's second example is kind of similar. This is what he says:

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."⁴

Again, he is talking about not being fake. Being seen praying makes you look like you are devoted to God. Lots of people in his day must have wanted to be seen praying, so that everyone around them would think they were very godly people. Now, the culture is different today, and maybe not everyone is impressed by praying these days...but still it is the same, lots of people really like to look good in front of other people, don't they? Don't *we* like to try to look impressive in front of other people?

² Matthew 6:2 (NRSV).

³ Matthew 6:3-4 (NRSV).

⁴ Matthew 6:5-6 (NRSV).

But what is happening when we do that? If, whenever we do something good, we try to make sure people see it, so that they admire us, and honor us, and think highly of us, what are we doing good things for? Are we doing them because we care about doing good, or because we care about ourselves looking good? It isn't about giving needy people what they need anymore, is it? It is about giving ourselves praise.

And that's what Jesus means when he says about people doing that that "they have received their reward." If you do something in order to get honor, then when people give you honor, you have gotten exactly what you aimed for. You aren't owed anything more, because you've gotten just what you purchased. You gave something in order to get something, and you got it. You don't get extra credit in heaven for that.

But if you do it in secret, Jesus says, that is something more real. You aren't faking generosity so other people will think you are being generous. If you can practice being generous even when nobody knows about it at all—then you are truly being generous in the eyes of God, and he makes a promise: God will not forget this kind of genuine goodness. It will be remembered and rewarded in heaven.

It is hard to live that way, because we like to get people's admiration, and it is really hard to set that aside in favor of a hoped-for promise from God, whom we can't even see. But Jesus tells us that the things of heaven are even more real than the things we can see, and they last forever, unlike the things we can see. What is the last part of this passage? Jesus says this:

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal."⁵

Moths, if they get inside your home, can eat holes through your clothing and make them worthless. Even things that seem to last a long time, like metal, can rust away. Things can be stolen. Nothing we have around us is really, safely going to last us forever. Jesus is telling us that what we should truly care about is not the kind of rewards we can have on earth, but the kind of heavenly rewards we are given by God, which last forever.

And he says one last thing: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."⁶

What does this mean? I think it means this: if we have a lot of treasure stored up somewhere, in our hearts we will be very devoted to that place. So if we earn all our treasure here, if all our rewards are things found in this life on earth, like getting praise from others or having nice things, then mostly what we will care about will be earthly things. Our hearts will be devoted to just what is around us. But we know all of that comes to an end.

⁵ Matthew 6:19-20 (NRSV).

⁶ Matthew 6:21 (NRSV).

Especially today, on Ash Wednesday, when we remember that we and everything around us crumbles to nothing eventually, we must remember that our hearts truly need to be devoted to something more than that. If we treasure having nice possessions, we will be faithful to a life of acquiring nice possessions, and we'll lose every one of them when we return to the earth. But if it is the treasure of God that we seek, stored up in heaven, then our hearts will be devoted to what will last forever.

We are starting the period of time called Lent, which is approximately 40 days long. It commemorates 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness, being tempted by offers of all the riches and worldly things that could be found in life, and rejecting all of that kind of treasure,⁷ instead choosing to serve God by giving himself up to us in love and generosity, which are treasures that would last forever.

As we pass through Lent, let us take some time every day in prayer to consider before God what we treat as treasure, and what rewards we seek. May Jesus, who loved and treasured *us*, be in our hearts and guide us. Amen.

⁷ See Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, and Luke 4:1-13.