

Ash Wednesday YA 2023

"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. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

What are the "treasures on earth" that Matthew's gospel is referring to? It's not a Tesla or a vacation home in Bora Bora. Though in other places, Jesus has incisive words about money, Jesus isn't focussed on money today, in this reading we hear every Ash Wednesday. Here, earthly treasure is about folly. It is the folly of seeking people's praise and regard. Jesus is saying, "If you spend your life trying to find happiness by performing for the sake of praise, then it's a dead end. The buzz you get from people's praise is fleeting. It is most deadly if you perform acts of religious piety for the sake of your own self-promotion. When you wed religion with self-promotion, you can't find your way out of a paper bag, you're so fooled by the stories you tell. You have received your reward."

Instead, when you give alms, pray, and fast, do it in secret. 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. What is the secret way?

The NRSV translates the word ταμῆϊον (*tamion*) as room. But, the sterile translation loses the context. In Jesus' time, the word would have been understood to have a nuanced meaning, "secret chamber." It makes a lot more sense since Jesus is talking about praying in secret. But where is this secret chamber?

Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." The heart was considered a chamber. In fact, we know it has four chambers. This is where Jesus is telling us to go. Go into the quiet of your heart and store the treasures there

that you reap from prayer. In the heart, the dust does not consume and the thieves do not break in and steal.

Lent is a time to purify our intentions so that we might know what lasts. One program we have for happiness is the praise, honor and respect we wish from other people. But, Jesus is warning us not to go down that route. It leads us sideways and it will not satisfy. For Lent, Jesus is saying, "Give this up." Forget the chocolate. Eat as much of that as you want. Rather, give up putting your hope in salvation on your performance, on your grip for esteem. Rather, rest, rest in God whose love has nothing to do with the image you wish to project. God knows you pass this image, to the one whom God created. There is nothing in Lent but to surrender to this love.

One of ways to practice this secret prayer is through centering prayer. I encourage you to join us for a communal practice of this secret prayer, also known as centering prayer every Tuesday. But, you can practice it by yourself. There are resources on our website. Centering prayer is a prayer of surrender, prayer of acceptance of you and others and life as it is. Over a long course of time, the prayer in secret builds your trust and helps you release those programs of happiness that don't really satisfy. In a way, the secret prayer is a fast that leads to the feasting in God—the true joy of being with God and in God. This is the heavenly treasure.

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