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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
2/17/2010, Ash Wednesday
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
Treasures in Heaven

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This evening's Gospel Lesson is from our Lord's Sermon on the Mount. It is a sermon that tugs at the heart. Indeed, if we would yield to it, it would make our hearts better -- not just our conduct, but also our hearts. Jesus would have us strive for purity in thoughts, words, and deeds. Far from harming our enemy, for example, we are to love our enemy, bless them that curse us, and pray for those who spitefully use us. (Matthew 5:44). Again, it is good and necessary to refrain from adultery, but our Lord would have us go beyond that so that we flee even lust in our hearts. (Matthew 5:27-28) Our hearts! Jesus would have them even better than they are at present.

This evening's appointed Lesson continues along the same lines. Jesus asks us to examine our motives and the desires of our heart. He would have us try to take stock of what it is we really treasure in this world, and he would urge us to labor for that which does not perish. And so, we come to my text for this evening:

¹⁹Do 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. (Matthew 6:19-20, NRSV)

In this evening's Lesson, Jesus discusses classical spiritual disciplines: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Our Lord takes it for granted that we will practice such disciplines. They were long commended and practiced in Israel, and Jesus assumes that Christians should practice them too. Only, we should not practice them hypocritically. We should not practice them for show. The issue, then, is not *whether* to pray, fast, and give alms, but rather *how* to do so. Jesus would have us do these things even if no one else in the world knew of our piety. If no one could praise us for piety, Jesus would have us be pious nonetheless. After all, pride can pray, pride can fast, and pride can give alms, as St. Augustine observed long ago¹, but it is even better when love prays, love fasts, and love gives alms.

My method of praising purity of heart, in this sermon, is to focus on two words within a simple phrase in our text. The phrase is "treasures in heaven." Jesus urges us to store up "treasures in heaven." Let's think about that, first by focusing on

¹ St. Augustine, 1 John 4

“*treasures* in heaven,” and then on “*treasures in heaven.*” What do we mean by “treasure” and what do we mean by “heaven”?

First, about “treasure,” I bet you will agree with me that the kind of treasure we should be laying up in heaven is not the kind of treasure a pirate seeks. It is not the kind of treasure that fits in a chest, so that the pirate can open up his chest and run his arms through the gold and jewels and so forth and be happy. What need we of such treasure in heaven? Why, when we can walk through gates of pearl, upon streets of gold so pure that they are almost transparent, what need we for a pirate’s chest of bangles and beads?

No, treasure in heaven is not money or gold or anything King Midas would covet. So, let’s try again. What is “treasure” in heaven? We need a more elevated notion of treasure than the pirate has. We need a notion of treasure that is more along the lines of what is important not to the pirate, but to Jesus. We should strive for “treasure” as Jesus reckons treasure to be, for that is the striving that counts. That is the striving that will not be in vain. My proposal concerning “*treasures in heaven*” is this: When all is said and done our real treasures in heaven will be people. Not gold or jewels, but people.

Imagine yourself, then, to be in heaven. What is going to do your heart good then? When you are strolling along those streets of gold, what is going to put joy in your heart and delight in your eye? I think the answer is *some soul that you helped save*. That enemy of yours, for example, if you could meet him heaven and know that you did him no harm, but rather helped pray him into heaven: would it not be a joy to meet that one there? Would he not be a treasure for you? Would he not be something you are very glad you helped lay up?

And then consider a case in the opposite direction -- not the case of someone whom you were tempted to hate on earth, but someone you were tempted to lust after. Consider yon woman walking toward you on heaven’s street, yon handsome man. On earth, you could have lusted for that one if you had permitted yourself. You could have indulged in fantasies and daydreams about that one, only if you had done so, you would have been failing to give honor to that one. But now in heaven, where all will be known, if you struggled against lust on earth, you will be able to look at each other full in the face, without shame. If you have tried for purity of heart toward that one, then when your paths cross in heaven, you will find a treasure there in heaven and at last you will be able to talk freely with each other, entirely filled with wisdom and love for each other.

Or the stranger on the sidewalk or the neighbor in need: you will be laying up treasure for yourself in heaven by your conduct toward that one?

That is the problem with false piety. It does not help win souls for Christ. It does not help lay up treasures in heaven. In fact, hypocrisy is off-putting. Think of that one who gives alms on the street corner. Jesus says that he “sounds a trumpet” before him, drawing everyone’s attention to his charity. Well, Jesus does not deny that his gets his treasure. He gets the admiration of the crowd. But, alas, he does not thereby lay up treasure in heaven precisely because the beggar receiving the alms can see right through him. The beggar is not drawn to Christ through the

charity, because the beggar can see that the almsgiver is not giving out of love for *him*, but rather love of *self*. And love of self is not what helps fetch people to Christ. Love of self is not what lays up treasures in heaven.

In general, laying up treasures for ourselves in heaven means bearing in mind the divine dimension in our dealings with others. We try to remember that the story is not done, the tale is not all told here on earth: we should so try to live with others that we can help pray them into heaven, or at least will not be ashamed if we should meet them in that better world.

Now, let's shift the emphasis to the other word, "heaven," "*treasures in heaven*" to "*treasures in heaven*." This is a little bit tricky. Most of the time when we think of heaven, we think of that elevated world where the Holy Trinity sits on three thrones, and the seraphim sing their threefold Sanctus continually, "Holy, Holy, Holy." And surely that is true. That is part of what we mean by "heaven."

But Lutherans are among those Christians who also connect "heaven" with "earth" and with our neighbors on this earth. That's because we join the Church's devotion to the doctrine of the Holy Incarnation of Our God. We believe that God the Son has lost his heart and lost his future to earth. He is a man, forever to remain a man. And he is here on earth, heart and body, body and soul, body and blood.

Back in Luther's day, the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli argued that Christ could not *really* be present in the Blessed Sacrament because Christ is safe and sound up in heaven. So, Zwingli concluded that Jesus must have been speaking poetically or symbolically when he said "This is my body, this is my blood."

But Luther sided with the Catholic Church on taking Jesus at his word, at his literal word. This, in turn, led Luther to a profound insight to what we mean by "heaven." Luther, that is, concluded that the fundamental meaning of "heaven" for a Christian is "the presence of Jesus Christ," and the great wonder is that his presence is here *on earth*, in this Blessed Sacrament, in the poor, the hungry, the naked, the imprisoned, such that ministry to them is ministry *to him*.

One of our great hymns in the LBW speaks of this:

- 1 Lord, thee I love with all my heart;
I pray thee, ne'er from me depart;
with tender mercy cheer me.
Earth has no pleasure I would share,
yea, heav'n itself were void and bare
if thou, Lord, wert not near me.
And should my heart for sorrow break,
my trust in thee can nothing shake.
Thou art the portion I have sought;
thy precious blood my soul has bought.
Lord Jesus Christ,
my God and Lord, my God and Lord,
forsake me not! I trust thy word.

(*Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart, LBW 325*)

This is right in the spirit of Martin Luther:

yea, heav'n itself were void and bare
if thou, Lord, wert not near me.

The upshot of this is that when we speak of “treasure *in heaven*,” I think we are speaking of Jesus and all those he loves. That is, we are speaking of our neighbors and of ourselves, for Jesus has taken up his lot with humanity.

The way, then, to lay up treasure “in heaven,” is to attend to those in need right here on earth. When it comes to piety, for example, people are not to be thought of as means to an end; they are not to be considered mere occasions for our prideful drawing of the eye toward ourselves and our charity.

Today is Ash Wednesday. It is the solemn start to the season of Lent, when Jesus walks on with steady step toward the Cross.

Lenten disciplines ask us to conform ourselves to his manner of life, and when it comes to the heart and motives, his heart was pure and his motives were always toward the blessing of others. For Jesus *treasured* people. The pirate might run his arms through his treasure chest and count himself happy, but Jesus counts himself happy simply to the degree that you and I and our neighbors are flourishing. The day is not a good day for Jesus unless some heart has been lifted, some misery allayed, some sinner drawn toward righteousness, some despairing person given hope.

That is the treasure that counts for Jesus, and he pursues that treasure with steady step, undeterred by the Cross, willing to pay even the ultimate cost of his innocent life if thereby he can save you and me and our neighbors.

In Lent we fall in behind him. We seek to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven as Jesus counts “treasure.” That is, we renew our life of love for this world, in the name of him who loves this world to the very end, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.