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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Gospel Lesson for Ash Wednesday warns us against vainglory. Jesus speaks against a certain *motive* for doing good. He asks that we not practice our piety before others in order *to be seen by them*. He seeks more purity from us than that. He seeks that we should practice our piety, not for the sake of being seen by others, but simply because of the love he has been preaching throughout his Sermon on the Mount. And so he asks us to love the unlovely, as we heard in a recent Gospel Lesson:

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you...
(Matthew 5:44, KJV)

Extraordinary love! Jesus is speaking of a love that extends beyond the usual reach of things. Jesus speaks of a love that reaches out even toward the enemy and those who have really hurt us.

And so it is that Jesus preaches against vainglory in the practice of piety. But he certainly does not preach against piety itself. Our Saviour wants us to be pious people. Especially he seeks that we should walk in his ways of love.

A certain verse has been on my heart recently. It speaks of gifts from God above. The apostle says this:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. (James 1:17, KJV)

Every good and perfect gift is from above. This includes the gentle and generous impulses of your heart. My theme in this sermon is that during this season of Lent now upon us, I want you to honor your gentle and generous impulses. Think of them as of divine origin, from heaven above. Cherish those good impulses and obey them.

Likewise, the bad impulses of our heart: they are not from above. They more likely come from Satan who is ravenous for souls to destroy.

So, the impulses of the heart: that is my topic for tonight. Follow you good impulses and disobey your bad ones.

Let give you an example from the subway. It is a minor matter. It is hardly worth speaking of compared to the misery and injustice in our city. But

maybe in its lowliness, it is an everyday kind of example of obeying the impulses the Lord sends us from above and disobeying the impulses that rumble for below.

So, earlier this week I went to visit our dear elderly member Ann Siemer. She is 101 years old, living in an assisted living home out on Long Island. "One-oh-one," she exclaims. "I can't believe it!" Ann sends us her love and assures us of her constant prayers.

I take the Long Island Railroad to Babylon to visit Ann. That all went well. But on the way back, after I transferred onto the subway, I happened to sit in a subway car with a man who disliked me. I do not know why he glared at me. New York City is a town that tends to respect clergy, but this fellow seems to have noticed my clerical collar and hated me for it. You know how you can sometimes feel when someone is staring at you. I felt he was staring at me and when I glanced at him, he frowned even more. He was not a kid. He was a grown man — maybe in his twenties or thirties. So, he was not a child, but he was chewing bubblegum. Anyway, the subway came to a stop, he jumped off, raced ahead a little bit, and hurled his bubblegum at me. It was quite a throw. I had to admire the throw. It went right through the closing subway doors and smacked me on the coat. I had this big blob of orange chewing gum on my nice coat. People on the subway gasped and were upset, but nothing could be done. The man had sped down the steps from the platform.

I was stunned and did nothing for a moment or two. Then I turned to the nice lady sitting beside me and said, "There is a God."

And because there is a God, I prayed for that fellow. I was furious with him and counted him an enemy, but precisely because I counted him an enemy, I did what Jesus asks. I prayed for him. And because I prayed for him, I calmed down a bit. As the day wore on, I even found myself imagining the hard times that fellow might have been through that could lead him to be so angry with a clergyman.

In a way, this is my BIG theme for this sermon: There is a God. And in Lent, it is a good time to start remembering that. Someday, we are going to have give an account of ourselves before our Maker. Eternity will lie before us. It will matter then whether we have obeyed the good impulses which come into our hearts from God above, or whether we have let them go and instead yielded to our bad impulses.

Let me give you a more serious example from yesterday's Pastor's Booth. An elderly lady told me that she had been a victim of fraud. She has little money, but she did have a life insurance policy with her son as beneficiary. She had worked hard to buy that life insurance policy. To some of us, it might not seem like a lot of money. But to her, it was about all she had, and she meant it for her son. But someone had forged her name to a key document and the money is now gone. Her faith remains strong, and she puts her trust in Jesus. But the money is gone. What she had hoped to leave to her son is

gone.

Again, I found myself thinking, "There is a God." This life of ours is no joke. Someone forges a name of an elderly defenseless woman, and imagines that he or she can get away with it. But the truth is, no one gets away with anything! Jesus lives, and to him we must give an account for ourselves.

Follow your good impulses then this Lent and always. And disobey your bad impulses, this Lent and always.

Thank heaven above: that is what Jesus did! He could have summoned twelve legion of angels to rescue him and destroy the world. But if he ever had such a dangerous impulse, he certainly did not act upon it, for here we stand — beneficiaries of his goodness. Now, he asks us to follow the pattern of his life. Do not practice piety for the sake of being seen, but do indeed practice piety! Be like your Father in heaven who sends his sunshine on both the good and the bad. Yield to the good and disobey the bad, following the example of our Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.