In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let’s begin with the teaching of our Lord from near the end of our Gospel Lesson. It is a teaching in which Jesus asks us to be rational folk, working for things that count, for things that will stand up in eternity. Jesus says this:

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)

These are fighting words. They sound poetic and perhaps idealistic, but they are in fact the words Jesus lived by, all the way to the Cross, and they are words he wants us to live by too. When we were baptized, we took up arms to fight, not to be idle.¹ So it was with Saint Paul in his moving testimony from today’s Epistle reading:

⁴but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger; ⁶by purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, ⁷truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. (2 Corinthians 6:4-8, RSV)

Paul had taken up the “weapons of righteousness” in order to use them, though it meant discipline and even suffering on his part to do so. This season of Lent now upon us asks us too to be willing to lay up treasures for ourselves in heaven, even if the laying up of those treasures is sometimes hard for us.

Let me tell you my theme for this sermon. It is this: As we try to lay up treasures in heaven, let us grant ourselves time to grow in piety. I want us to slow

¹A line from St. John Chrysostom’s homily on Matthew 4: “Yea, for therefore thou didst take up arms, not to be idle, but to fight. For this cause neither doth God hinder the temptations as they come on…”
down some, my friends, and to grant ourselves some more time for fasting, for almsgiving, for prayer, and for the development of new virtues within us.

Our offertory prayer would urge the same thing upon us. There are many good things we can and should offer our Maker, including our money. But the classic offertory prayer asks us to remember our time too:

OFFERTORY PRAYER

A Merciful Father,

C we offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us – our selves, our time, and our possessions, signs of your gracious love. Receive them for the sake of him who offered himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Let us take time this Lent to become more earnest in our piety. Let us not try for a day or two to pray more, fast more, and give more. Rather, let’s resolve to work at these things henceforth, until some new virtues and holy habits take hold in our hearts.

Let me give you a passing example in my own life of trying to give some time to the development of a new habit. It’s not a profound example. In fact, it was a failure. But maybe it illustrates my theme anyway: A couple years ago, I tried my hand at giving up coffee. For forty days and forty nights I did without coffee. I wasn’t driven to this by health concerns. I was simply curious what life would be like without coffee. Well, at the end of the forty days and forty nights, I found that nothing had changed, except that I was sad. I missed my coffee. I missed having coffee with Carol at breakfast time. So, I gave it up and went back to drinking coffee, and I’ve been happy ever since. You might have better results if you try this experiment, but for me, fasting from coffee seemed to give me little in return.

So, this little example is a story of failure when it comes to developing a new, holy habit. I did not develop the habit of doing without coffee. But my point is simply this: I did try for forty days and forty nights. I didn’t try for just a day or two, figure that this was miserable, and then return to coffee. I tried to give it a good shot.

The general idea is that if something is worth doing, it is worth spending time trying to do it.

Let me give you another example — a more important example. Think ahead to Christmastime. Think ahead to the buying of gifts for our loved ones. Theologian Phillip Cary invites us recognize the power of our fast-paced society to deprive us of the ability to love or take delight in things, because we permit ourselves to be too busy. Dr. Cary tells this little story about slowing down:

I saw this [power of culture to prevent us from loving things] clearly for the first time one Christmas morning when our youngest son was just old enough to begin participating in the ritual of opening presents under the tree. We gave him his
first present to unwrap – I think it was a little truck he could push around on the floor – and he started playing with it right then and there, as the rest of the family proceeded to the next round of gifts. And then this small, awful thing happened: his turn came round again, and he was still absorbed in playing with the truck, so we interrupted him, got the little truck out of his hands, and made him open his next present. I don’t remember if he ever got back to playing with the truck.

It was a small thing, but I really hated it. I love to watch little children play. I love the way they are intent on understanding the things around them and grow attached to them, which I think is at bottom a kind of love. And here we were preventing that bond of attachment from developing between Jacob and his little truck, just so we could load him with more stuff than he could ever really get attached to…We were reading the Little House on the Prairie books in those days and I wondered if my child would ever come to love a toy as deeply as little Laura Ingalls loved the one and only doll she had as a child. What were we depriving him of by giving him so much stuff?²

When it comes to piety, I fear that we are like Dr. Cary’s little son: we are pushed and pulled and urged to move on, so that we end up not granting ourselves the time it takes to become more holy people. It takes time to pray. Fasting doesn’t really change us much if we do it for only a day or two. If we permit ourselves to be overly busy laying up treasures for ourselves on earth, we might miss laying up treasures for ourselves in heaven.

The virtues of courage, self-control, justice, and wisdom, along with faith, hope, and love are often slow in coming to us. We need to work at them. We need to practice them. We cannot permit ourselves to be forever flitting about, preoccupied with so many superficial things, if we really want to become more Christ-like. Becoming more like Jesus is the work of a lifetime. If we were hermits living out in the desert or in some mountain cave, it would be natural and easier for us to spend time in fasting, prayer, and works of love. But we do not live in the desert or in a cave, but rather in a fast world that tempts us away from trying to train ourselves in a more holy direction.

The stories of Jesus growing up obedient to his parents, fasting for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness, and of his periodic retreats to a lonely place apart for prayer are central to who he is. He is not simply a God for whom all things are easy. Rather he is God incarnate who worked and disciplined himself, so that he would have time and strength to minister to a needy world. I do not

think it would be wrong to say of Jesus that in his short life, he crafted himself to be ready to serve others — indeed to even die on a cross if that is what it would take to save us.

St. John Chrysostom has a splendid saying about time. I’ve probably quoted it before:

For God will say also to us, “I gave you time to learn this art of piety, wherefore have ye foolishly and uselessly wasted that time?” (St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on St. John, NPNF, Vol. 14, page 211)

Learning this art of piety does take time. It seemed to take time for Jesus; it is likely to take time for us too. As we enter upon Lent now and renew our work to become more Christ-like, let us resolve to spend some serious time at this year, to the benefit of our neighbors and to the glory of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.