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

The traditional disciplines of Lent are repentance, prayer, fasting, and charity. This year, let us focus on the last of these traditional Lent disciplines: charity, or almsgiving.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus asks us to be charitable, but in a humble way. He asks for a certain set of the soul as we give to the poor. Sometimes we cannot help but have others see us as we give alms. If we should give money or a sandwich to some poor soul on the sidewalk, others might see us. Being seen is not the problem. The problem is giving to the poor in order to be seen. That is, the problem is the seeking of glory. And so we come to our Bible text for this evening. Jesus says this:

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. (Matthew 6:2-4, NRSV)

That would be pretty ridiculous: to have someone sound a trumpet before us as we give to the poor. I cannot imagine any of us doing that. You recall the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The tax collector found favor with God because he threw himself entirely upon the mercy of the Lord, smiting his breast and praying:

God be merciful to me a sinner. (Luke 18:13, RSV)

The man did not brag at all. He simply prayed his Kyrie.

But the Pharisee ruined his piety by bragging about it. And he bragged about it in such a way as to humiliate the tax collector. The passage in St. Luke goes this way:

10 Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, “God, I thank thee
that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. \( ^{12} \) I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get."

That last boast is the one we are talking about this evening. The Pharisee boasts that he gives tithes of all he gets. That means he is generous with his money, as I hope you and I will be too. But he ruins his generosity by seeking praise.

This Pharisee is a good man in the substantial sense that he gives away his money, trying to support a good cause. He is charitable. He is on the side of good. He is helping the world. It is too bad that he spoils his soul by giving, not from compassion, but for the sake of glory.

Well, this is a lesson easily learned, I believe. When we give alms, let us do so for the sake of compassion on others, not for the sake of gaining fame for ourselves. Let our motive for giving be love and kindness, not vainglory.

But let us indeed be charitable. Let us practice charity during Lent. Indeed, let us practice charity all the time.

I want to shift the emphasis of our Gospel Lesson, then, away from our motives for giving, to the simple idea that we ought to be charitable. If we are Christians, then we have given our lives and our hearts to Jesus, and so we ought to be charitable as he is charitable. This too is part of the flow of our Gospel Lesson. It is contained in those final words of Jesus about how God will "reward us." Listen to our passage again:

\[ ^{3} \text{But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,} \quad ^{4} \text{so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.} \]  

(Matthew 3:3-4, NRSV)

This means that giving alms is a BIG deal to our God. It is the kind of thing he notices. It is the kind of thing that pleases him, makes him smile. Our life is getting on the right track when we practice charity. Eternity approves!

And I suspect that deep in our hearts, we all know that.

One of the surprising joys of our Pastor’s Booth here at Immanuel is our jar for nickels. The fun of the Pastor’s Booth is that Pastor Caleb and I offer “spiritual help” for 5 cents. It is a take-off on the Peanuts cartoon about Lucy and her psychiatric help booth — 5 cents! So, Pastor Caleb and I have a jar for the nickels. But we do not really want the nickels. In fact we have a plate of nickels there for people to use, along with a sign that says, “Free! We provide the nickels.”

So everyone knows that we are not really offering prayer for money. Offering prayer for money would be awful, especially in a Lutheran church. It would be like selling indulgences all over again.
So, we do not want the nickels and we tell that to people. Nonetheless, many people smile and say, “I know that you do not require the nickel, but I want to give anyway.” And it turns out that a lot of people feel that way. Even if they themselves do not sit down at our booth and request prayer, they put money into our jar anyhow. They say, “This is for someone else.” Or “I simply want to help.” We get nickels, quarters, dollar bills, five dollar bills, even twenty dollar bills.” I try to use that money for good causes.

Why are passersby doing this? I think it is because deep in the heart of us humans, we desire love. We desire to receive love and we desire to give love. We would be awfully glad to live in a world where there is more love.

And for Christians, this desire for love should be especially strong. How cannot it not be strong, when we reckon with the idea that our dear Saviour Jesus Christ did not give away simply a nickel or a dollar or a lot of his money, but rather his life — he loved the world so much? When we become Christians, we give ourselves to this Jesus. When we are baptized, we become his disciples, and give away our hearts to him. Now we should try to care about the things Jesus cares about. And Jesus cares about the poor!

Here at Immanuel, we recently sang a Sunday morning hymn that struck me with its words about the identification of Jesus with the poor. Jesus loves the poor. He keeps his eye on them. He worries about them, and their neglect touches him personally. Verse 3 in the hymn *Lord of Glory, You Have Bought Us* especially lifts up our Lord’s love for the poor. It goes this way:

3 Wondrous honor you have given
to our humblest charity
in your own mysterious sentence,
“You have done it all to me.”
Can it be, O gracious Master,
that you deign for alms to sue,
saying by your poor and needy,
“Give as I have giv’n to you”? (LBW 424)

That “mysterious sentence” the hymn refers to comes from St. Matthew 25 — the famous story of the sheep and the goats. Jesus answers those good people who wonder when did they ever minister to him, Jesus. Jesus gives a beautiful answer. The passage goes this way:

37Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39And when was it that we saw you sick or
in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:37-40, NRSV)

You might not yet be in the stage of life when you can be as charitable as you would like. Student debts, family obligations, low income, poor health — such forces might be working against your desire to be charitable. For you at this stage in life, you might be able to drop only a nickel in the jar at the Pastor’s Booth. Or only a nickel in the offering plate.

But for some of us, life has moved on, and if we pause and take stock of things, we are more able now to be charitable than we were before. Then Lent asks us to look with compassion on the poor and try to help them.

I have lived in the city long enough to respect the various convictions people have about giving money to beggars on the sidewalk. Some people give, some people do not, and many of us have no consistent policy, but give sometimes and sometimes not.

But when it comes to this business of charity, let us not limit ourselves to thinking just of beggars on the sidewalk. God might also have placed in your path some poor person or poor family you would love to help. Well, Lent asks you to look at the poor person or poor family and picture Jesus standing there before you, and go ahead and help. Your help might take the form of money. Your help might take the form of encouragement or mentoring or simply trying to share what life has taught you. Whatever your help is, try to give it in the name of Jesus. That might be the most important thing you do that day: to give help in the name of Jesus to people who are down and out.

The great thing about the Gospel is that Almighty God is willing to look at you and me and to see Jesus in us. Then he smiles upon us. But if we truly want Jesus to be in us, then should look at other people in this world, including the poor, and we should see Jesus in them, and we should try to help.

All of these Lenten disciplines are forms of trying to remain true to the Jesus who loved us enough to die for us, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.