



CRUSADER LUTHERAN CHURCH

God's Vision Our Mission

Our Lenten Journey: Toward a New & Stronger Relationship with God

Sermon for **February 17, 2010** — Ash Wednesday

Pastor Sandra Cox Shaw

*Advent teaches that Jesus dwelt with us — and that God is with us everywhere.
Now, on Ash Wednesday, it's time to ask: What are we going to do about it?*

Scriptural Reference: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

The words of Jesus – “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal” – held special meaning for me last week. Last Thursday morning, the morning after 28 or so inches of snow had fallen, there were boot prints in the heavy snow coming up my steps, and our snow shovel – our one and only shovel – had been stolen. There had been a thief.

Now I'm sure that had I had the people from the television show CSI, they could have taken prints of those boots and tracked down the perpetrator. They could have brought in a bloodhound – I think they can work in snow – and they would have tracked down my shovel ... perhaps. But a stolen snow shovel is not a high-priority crime, even though it feels pretty high-priority when there's so much snow out there, when you can't get to the store and even if you do, you know they're going to be sold out.

In all seriousness, “things” can hold a lot of importance to us. That snow shovel, old as it was, was very important to us that morning. We cannot get through our lives without certain things. Without cars that can be driven on cleared roads – or buses or subways – many of us cannot get to where we need to go. We cannot get to work or to church or to the places we volunteer without those things, as Washington found last week, when the government grinded to a halt without bus and subway service.

And I don't really want to live in a world without certain things, like toothbrushes and soap and bathtubs and showers. We need tools. We need tools to cook and to clean and to shovel and to garden. I could give up a whole lot of the things I own, but some things truly are necessities.



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So as we read the words of Jesus together, we might be asking, “Is Jesus telling us we need to get rid of all of our things – all of our earthly treasures?” I don’t think that Jesus is condemning things *per se* in his advice given to the disciples. However, there seems to be a very strong warning against living our lives so that “things” become our treasures.

Now tonight, as we begin our Lenten journey, it is a good time to ask ourselves not just **where do we store** our treasures. I think it is the perfect night to start asking ourselves **what are our treasures**. Hold that in your mind, if you could, for a few minutes: What are **your** treasures?

Now some Christian denominations take these words of Christ and interpret them to mean that we should have all of our focus and our energy on the afterlife. You know some Christians like that, I’m sure – I know you do – well-meaning, faithful Christians who do not worry so much about this world. Global warming, pollution, dirty water, diminishing resources, social justice, fairness, equality aren’t as important to them, because this world – in their mind – is just a stopping-off point on the trip to the hereafter.

It is easy to take the gospel we hear tonight and think that all of our focus should be on the treasures we have in heaven, and to heck with whatever goes on here on earth. It’s easy for some Christians to see the sum total of the Christian walk to convert as many people as possible and to get into heaven – and you will hear followers of such theology talk about how many people they have “saved.” I’ve heard pastors from other denominations talk about how many people they have “saved.”

Well I’m glad to be in the midst of people from the UCC, the Presbyterian and the Lutheran traditions, because we tend to believe that Jesus did the saving, and that it was done 2000 years ago without any help or any decisions on our part. He handled it just fine without us. So we are told to tell this good news, and to stay out of the way of the Holy Spirit and let it do its work.

As to problems of this world, we tend to believe we are Christ’s hands here on earth, to deal with all the problems he dealt with: with hunger ... with disease ... with injustice. And in Christianity – and in all denominations – even very faithful disciples can develop a sort of tunnel vision, to be so focused on heaven that we don’t look at the world around us.

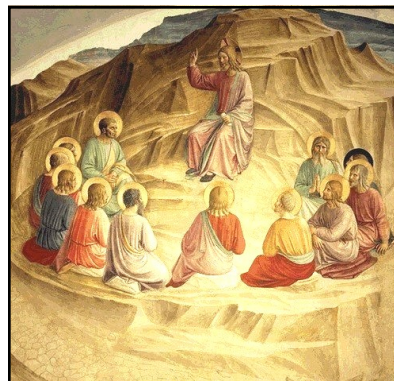
From such a world view, there can also come another perspective. There can evolve a tendency to live as though our God is a God who lives in a far-away galaxy thousands of light years away – the image of God on a fluffy white cloud looking down on us.

So, in addition to reflecting this Lent on what we value as our treasures, I think it’s also a good time to also reflect on our image of God. I would invite you – I did this once, I was challenged to do this – to try to come up with a drawing that reflects your image of God. And if you really want to stretch yourselves, try to come up with a drawing of a feminine image of God. If you come up with your images of God, I’d love to hear about them.

So in addition to reflecting on what are our treasures, let’s think about our image of God.

Is God far away? Or is God right here, right now in our troubles, in all of our bad decisions and all the stupid things we do, and the ways we can really mess up and get things wrong, and all the ways that we're weak — with us through every part of our day?

Well, a far-away God observing me as if through a hidden camera on *Candid Camera* is not my experience of God. God through the incarnation in Jesus Christ came to dwell among us. We talk about this a lot in Advent; have we forgotten Advent? We talk about how the name "Emmanuel" means "God with us." However, almost three months later — when we start Lent — it's easy to forget that news and that God did come to live among us.



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I believe that if Advent serves to remind us that Jesus indeed came and dwelt among us, then Lent serves to ask us the question: **"So, what are you going to do about it?"** How does this incarnation of God into this messed-up world impact your relationship with God? So, what are we going to do about it this Lent?

My congregation knows I love to give them questions, so here are the three questions I've given you so far: What are our real treasures? What is our understanding of the likeness and the image of God? And what are we going to do about it?

Of course, I'm going to give you my thoughts on the subject. The Matthew text warns us about living piously in front of others. Public opinion of our "goodness" can be very appealing, but it's not a treasure that lasts.

What is the real treasure that Jesus is speaking about, I believe, is our relationship with God -- closeness to God, in a communal relationship in many ways. We need community. We need to gather in communities. We need to be reminded of God's work among us. I need to hear your stories, and you need to hear mine and we need to hear each others' stories of God.

But there is also a very private relationship with God that nurtures us in another way. That is the relationship that strengthens us when we pray, when we pick up the Bible, when we meditate, when we go to Bible study, when we give ourselves to others when nobody is watching ... when we do that nice thing for somebody that nobody else every knows about.

I would say that there is nothing more important in our lives than strengthening our connection to God, and that is our ultimate treasure ... and I think that is the purpose of this Lenten journey we start. It is pretty difficult to nurture a relationship with a God who lives in a far-off, hidden corner of the universe. But Scripture and our own experiences of God tell us that God is not far away. God is in every single part of our life. It is a God who loves us ... who watches over us ... who is ready to hear us to tell this God how we messed up, and to ask

for forgiveness and to ask for strength. It is a God who cries every time we cry.

So what are we going to do this Lent? Here at Crusader, we are going to be looking at the hallmarks of a faithful disciple: prayer, worship, scripture, service, spiritual friendships, and giving. And I understand at RUC (Rockville United Church), you're going to be focusing on mission and on service. These are not incompatible at all. We are on the same path together, working on strengthening our relationship with God and looking at the world as if we are the hands of Christ, not as if we are just here to save people, but as if we are here to work on the same problems Christ worked on.

Last Monday I had lunch with two friends, and we got to talking about Lent. We started sharing stories about what we had given up in the past. One talked about the year he gave up alcohol, another talked about the year that he was a vegetarian for 6 weeks, another person talked about – and this obviously was not me – the year they gave up chocolate. Without meaning to, the conversation escalated; it developed into almost one-upmanship. The fellow who had given up alcohol said that was a lot harder than giving up meat, and they got into a friendly discussion of that: Which was more noble – to be a vegetarian or to not drink?

Without meaning to – and these are all people of faith – it dawned on me afterwards that we had become the very hypocrites that Jesus was talking about. Anyone listening in at the restaurant from another table would have thought we were out of our minds: I'm a better Christian than you because I gave up chocolate." It was silly.

But what it brought home is it's so easy to fall into that – it's so easy to get into that one-upmanship. And that's what Jesus is warning us against: Don't be a hypocrite. This is how they behave. You're better than that.

No, we are not studying the hallmarks of discipleship – and RUC is not focusing on mission and on service – to impress each other, or to impress anybody in our neighborhood, or our bishops, or anyone. We are doing it because we want to have a closer walk with Jesus. That is our treasure – our relationship with God. That is the journey we start on tonight.

Just by the fact that you are here, I know that we are a people who believe in the possibility of new and better relationships with God. And unlike a snow shovel – or anything else we might own – a relationship with God can never be stolen from us.

So it's up to each of us to answer the question this Lent: How can I nurture my relationship with God? God came to Earth because of love for us. God and Jesus came to teach us and to die because of us. So the question, is what are we going to do about it, now that we know this? How is that going to shape our Lent?

So this Lent, as we all travel at different congregations at times, and together at times – I pray that we all will devote ourselves to a new and stronger relationship with God, and that through this journey we will grow more into being God-centered, God-grounded and God-loving people. Amen.