

ASH WEDNESDAY

February 10, 2016

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Matthew 6:1, 5-6, 16-21

*"Moth-proof, Rustproof, Theft-proof"*

Pastor Saul Stensvaag

Our gospel text today/tonight has Jesus encouraging us not to store up for ourselves treasures on earth, where they are prey to moths, rust, and thieves. He tells us to rather store up treasures in heaven. And the heavenly treasure that we are reminded of in our liturgy today/tonight is the treasure of forgiveness of sins – the treasure of a new life given us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Ash Wednesday is always a time to open our eyes. It's time to **fess up and face the music**. On Ash Wednesday, poised on the edge of Lent, we **take stock of our situation**, and try to be brutally honest about ourselves.

It's **no fun, that's for sure**. How much better if we could simply keep going along the way we were, knowing we aren't perfect, but **satisfied that we're "no worse than anyone else."**

We'd probably prefer to just slide through life without this unpleasantness. We'd settle for a cheap sort of grace – an easy forgiveness. You know, the idea that **God will forgive us – because that's his job**.

But **Ash Wednesday catches us up short**. *"Remember that you are dust,"* we hear, *"and to dust you shall return."* It's **time to face the facts** about ourselves.

Do you remember that **feeling you had as a child** when you had **done something really bad**, and you knew you were going to get in trouble for it? You would have given anything just to be able to avoid facing the music. **If only things could just go on as if nothing had happened.**

But, if you were lucky, you soon learned an important life lesson; namely, that just going on doesn't make things better – it only makes things worse. Because, if the bad thing you'd done was something like breaking your mom's favorite vase, you knew that **someday you'd be found out**.

And in the meantime, you **could never feel quite right in your relationship with your mother** until you had **faced her, confessed and apologized**, and received her words of forgiveness. Now, the **forgiveness usually came with some appropriate punishment**, but **even that had a healing effect**, since **at least you knew that the sin was behind you** now.

And sometimes, **if your mom was feeling especially loving**, she might even forgive you and waive the punishment. Being told, *"it's okay. I forgive you,"* was a great feeling. **It made you feel brand new.**

These **childhood experiences can help us understand our need to confess our rebellion against God** – our sins – so that we can experience the rebirth that comes from knowing we are forgiven. It's like **getting a fresh start**. It's like **beginning all over with a clean slate**.

**Admitting our brokenness – our sinfulness – is a major part of our worship today.**

We began by saying part of Psalm 51. Perhaps when we did that, you felt some resentment at the **implications** of some of the phrases. **But they speak the truth**, whether you like it or not.

And if you want the Lenten journey to be at all meaningful, then **I recommend that you hear these words again**, and admit that **they are describing you**, just as I admit that **they describe me**:

*Wash me through and through from my wickedness, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you only have I sinned, O Lord, and done what is evil in your sight. ...Purge me from my sin, and I shall be pure; wash me and I shall be clean indeed."*

With these words, we acknowledge before God that, despite appearances, despite the fact that we often think, *"Well, at least I'm not as bad as some people,"* despite all of our attempts to avoid it, we are sinners, and **our only hope** is to **throw ourselves on the mercy of the court**.

Our Lenten theme this year is, *"Discover the Treasure."* And one of the best treasures our God gives us is the treasure of forgiveness.

The only way for us to experience this heavenly treasure of forgiveness in Christ, is to let go of all pretenses, and confess our sinfulness. Because the problem isn't going to go away by ignoring it.

Our liturgy today is relentless in forcing us to focus on our condition – on exactly where we stand.

After the offering, we will confess our sins with phrase after phrase describing the many ways we have turned our backs on God. It gets very specific. It's enough to make us squirm.

And after each of these description, the congregation responds: *Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and immortal, have mercy on us.*

Here are some of those petitions:

- For self-centered living and for failing to walk with humility and gentleness.
- For longing to have what is not ours and for hearts that are not at rest with ourselves.
- For reluctance in sharing the gifts of God, and for carelessness with the fruits of creation.
- For hurtful words that condemn, and for angry deeds that harm.
- For squandering the gifts of love and grace.

The list just keeps going on and on. And **all of these words apply to every last one of us**.

I hope the Holy Spirit will open your eyes to this reality. Because you'll **never be able to discover the treasure of forgiveness** if you don't first **acknowledge your utter need for it**.

But if we do acknowledge our sin, then our Heavenly Father will surely hear our request. He will do what we ask in Psalm 51:

*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain me with your bountiful spirit. "*

God will hear this request, and God will grant our request. He will do so **not because our actions have earned his forgiveness. On the contrary, our actions couldn't begin to make up for our guilt.**

But God will hear and respond **because of the precious blood of his only Son who died on the cross to redeem us**. It was our sins – my sins – your sins – that nailed Jesus to the cross. But it was **his incredible love for me – for you – that kept him there**.

God will hear, and God will, indeed, *renew a right spirit within us*, and give us each *the joy of his saving help once again*.

Friends, today/tonight we begin a voyage of discovery. May God open our eyes and our hearts to see the wonderful treasures God has given us as His beloved children.

Today/tonight, as the cross of ashes is made upon your forehead, may it remind you not only of your mortality, but also of the cross made on your forehead on the day you were baptized. Because along with that cross, God gave you the promises of forgiveness and eternal life.

Surely, **this is a treasure which no moth, or rust, or thief can take away from us**.

Throughout these 40 days, may we **discover together what other heavenly treasures our Lord wants to give us**.

TODAY IS A NEW BEGINNING. Don't let it be a false start. **Let's make a commitment to ATTEND WORSHIP EVERY WEEK during the forty days of Lent**.

If we do, then **I promise you**, when we celebrate the **glorious Easter Treasure of new life** – we will know for certain that our journey of discovery was worth it. Amen