

Lent – A Time of Renewal of Servanthood
Matthew 6:1-6; 16-21
March 1, 2017

“Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Grace, mercy, and peace from the one who came not to be served but to serve, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

This is Ash Wednesday and that means today begins the traditional season of Lent. Ash Wednesday begins the 40-day period prior to Easter in which Christians are supposed to take inventory of themselves. Lent is a time for us to examine our lives – not to see how good we are, but to see where we miss the mark of righteousness set by our Savior’s life.

Here’s what that’s like. Imagine that you have just remodeled and redecorated your house. You’ve hung all the right pictures. You’ve bought all the right furniture. You’ve painted and wallpapered in all the right colors and textures. You’ve laid the best of carpet and the shiniest of tiles on the floors. Besides all that, you’ve cleaned and made sure that everything is in its proper place. One look around tells you – your house is perfect.

There’s a knock at the door. You open the door to find that your neighbor has come to visit. You gladly invite him in because you’re anxious to show off your beautiful house. But as your neighbor is coming in, he does something strange. He runs his fingers across the top of the door. As he looks at the dust on his fingers, you see just a twinge of disgust on his face.

You ignore this oddity and begin to describe where you found all the wonderful things in your living room. But your neighbor isn't paying attention. Instead, he has opened your guest closet only to find the ratty old carpet you pulled up from the living room floor but you saved because you kept thinking you might want it some time later. You try not to notice the frown on his face as you pull him from the closet and close the door.

You lead your neighbor upstairs in an effort to show him the bedroom you're so proud of – but he has stopped in the hallway. He has pulled down the attic steps and is now, to your horror, inspecting your attic. You feel anxious because the attic is where you put all the shabby furniture from the old days that you didn't want anyone to see but you didn't want to throw away either.

After you've pulled him down and pushed the steps up, you guide your neighbor to your kitchen, which is Emeril Lagasse perfect. The problem is your neighbor took a left at the kitchen door and is now in your basement. You stand red-faced as he surveys this disaster area full of old paint cans, dirty cleaning rags, and all the other remnants of the "old" house that you still own.

Does that sound like something out of a bad nightmare? Here's how this applies to Lent. In this little scenario, you are you, your house is your life, and your neighbor is Lent. Again, this year, Lent has come to give your life a thorough examination. Lent doesn't come to inspect the parts of your life that you've polished up for the world to see. Lent comes to prod around in the places where you would rather not have anyone look.

This Lent the mid-week services are structured to help you look at different areas of your Christian life. We are going to focus on servanthood, obedience, witness, true religion, priorities, Godly fear and Christian unity. These are areas of life we could all grow in and Lent 2017 will give you the opportunity to see where your Christian life needs work.

In tonight's Gospel, our Savior talks about Christian servanthood – how to and how not to. Jesus talks about being a servant to our neighbors and being a servant to the Lord. We will deal with servanthood to our neighbors first.

It's very important to see that, in tonight's reading, Jesus fully supports the idea that Christians are supposed to be doing good works. Notice he says, "When you give to the needy." Jesus doesn't say "if you give to the needy" but when. The structure of the sentence tells us that Jesus just assumes we will be going good deeds, such as, giving to the needy, protecting the innocent, comforting the brokenhearted, and so on.

Nowhere in Scripture will you find Jesus saying that Christians are exempt from doing good deeds. You won't find anything but support for good works in the Bible. In fact, in the book of James we read that faith without works is dead.

What Jesus takes exception to, in our reading, is the motivation of some good works.

Jesus condemns those who do hypocritical good works. This is a matter of doing the right thing for the wrong reason. This was the practice of the Pharisees of Jesus' day. The Pharisees loved to make a spectacle of how much they gave to the poor. However, in doing so, they weren't being servants of their neighbors but servants of themselves. Their motives were self-serving and therefore their deeds were self-serving. They weren't hungry for the good of their neighbors they were hungry for the praise of their neighbors.

We are supposed to be serving like Jesus served. If you read your Bible, you'll find many instances where Jesus healed someone and then told them not to tell anyone. Why? Jesus wasn't looking for the approval that such a thing could bring. He was interested in people seeing what he did and praising God.

Jesus also talks about being a servant to God. He speaks of praying and fasting. Praying and fasting are good ways to keep your perspective on who you are and who God is. When we pray and fast we admit that God is the Lord of all and we are but his humble servants. It's good for a servant to know his place.

But when our praying and fasting become vehicles for us to show the world our righteous piety, our praying and fasting become nothing but filthy rags to God. Our praying and fasting become an offense to God. And the only reward we will ever receive for such acts will be the hollow praise of the fickle people around us.

God is interested in our servanthood both to him and to our neighbors. But God's interest never lies so much in the deed as it does in the motivation of the deed. God judges us not by the works of our hands but by the attitude of our hearts. Christian servanthood is more attitude than effort. But, having said that, the effort must still be there because Christian good deeds are the necessary product of someone who loves God first, his neighbor second, and himself last.

The last thing Jesus talks about is storing up treasures. I've heard people say that it's sinful to store up treasures for yourself – and that's not true. Jesus is all in favor of you storing up treasures for yourself. That is, Jesus is in favor of storing up treasures for yourself as long as your treasure is in Heaven.

We need to keep our vision focused on what really matters. As someone so aptly put it, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." Jesus wants us to be the best servants this earth can witness. He wants us to serve our fellow man and our Lord. He doesn't want us to get sidetracked into thinking that it matters what the world thinks.

He wants us to know that the approval of our Heavenly Father is the only thing in life that matters. And we will achieve our Father's approval when we do the right things for the right reason. That is, we serve not for our glory but so the world might see our good works and glorifies our Father who is in heaven.

I urge you to begin Lent 2017 by examining the condition of your servanthood. Is it

thriving and active? Is it done quietly so not too much of you shows? Is it done only for the glory of God?

To help you keep your Christian servanthood in good condition, start each day of this Lenten season with this little prayer:

Make me a servant humble and meek
Lord, let me lift up those who are weak
And may the prayer of my heart always be
Make me a servant – today.