
Heavenly Treasures

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**A sermon by the Reverend Canon Wallace Marsh
Ash Wednesday**

As a priest, I am called to be with a person in the last days or hours of their life. It is an intimate setting, a holy setting, full of fear and mystery.

If I don't know the dying person, the family will often spend the first thirty minutes going through the important highlights of their loved one's life: the educational institutions attended, the career advancements, the successful investment strategies, a list of the volunteer work and positions held in various civic and social clubs.

You know, it's all the things we want to appear in our obituary. If you are like me, someone who grew up in a small town, you have actually overheard family and friends say they joined a club or took a leadership position in order to "fill out" their obituary.

Time and time again, what I am fascinated by is the dynamic that is present in those rooms. It is an amazing dynamic. Let me tell you what I am talking about; when I enter a room, the family wants me to know all about their loved one's earthly accomplishments, but the person facing death takes the conversation in another direction.

The person facing death wants to focus on the heavenly. They use every ounce of energy, sometimes every last breath, to speak the names of family members and loved ones. There is something profoundly holy and heavenly about those names and about those people. Sometimes the dying person will go hours without saying anything and then suddenly speak the name of a place. Initially, the family is confused, but it doesn't take long before a family is reliving a vacation or family dinner.

That dynamic seems to happen all the time when I visit someone who is dying. The living is focusing on the earthly, while the dying focus on the heavenly. It is no wonder Jesus says, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Biblical Scholar NT Wright says that there is a lot of confusion behind the words "heavenly treasure." We tend to think about doing certain works of piety in order to bank heavenly points. Is that what Jesus meant when he spoke of heavenly treasure? Perhaps, Jesus' words are much more in line with what He is describing in the Lord's Prayer, which just so happens to be those random few verses omitted from tonight's gospel.

Jesus says, "thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." We pray every week at Holy Eucharist. Some of us pray those words every day, "thy kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven." God answers that prayer. We know it because that is what dying people are telling us!

Their final days are spent recalling the heavenly treasures of this life, treasures we often overlook in our pursuit of the earthly. We are so consumed and scheduled that we miss the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

We begin this holy season tonight with a reminder of death: "You are dust and to dust you shall return." Death has a way of giving direction and meaning to our lives. If you don't believe me, ask anyone who has seen their life flash before their eyes. They tend to walk away from that experience with a greater sense of meaning and purpose.

For Christians, death gives meaning to our lives, it's the very reason we focus our attention on the cross. Christ death gives meaning to our lives.

The cross that will be placed upon our foreheads reminds us that we are dying. Yet, wouldn't it be nice if these ashes weren't so quick to wash off? Wouldn't it be nice if these words weren't so quick to go in one ear and out the other? Why? Because death helps us see the heavenly in our lives.

Lent is a time to draw closer to God and a time to focus on the cross. Yes, prayers, devotion, study and worship are important, but if you are like me, it's helpful to remember that some of the "heavenly treasures" are the people God has placed in my life.

If Lent is about drawing closer to God and focusing on the cross, then perhaps Jesus is saying the heavenly treasures are found in people who reflect the image of God, or in the people sitting next to us who have crosses on their heads and Christ dwelling in their hearts.

If today's service reminds us that we are dying, perhaps we use this holy season to act like dying people, to prioritize our lives, to notice that God is incarnate in our lives, and to start living as though there is an abundance of heavenly treasure around us.

Begin Lent by opening your eyes to God's grace, by identify the heavenly, and use this season to pursue those heavenly treasures!