

Bill Countryman

ASH WEDNESDAY 2/ 25/ 2009

Good Shepherd Berkeley

Isa. 58:1-12; Ps. 103:8-14; 2 Cor. 5:20b-6:10; Matt. 6:1-6, 16-21

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matt. 5:19-21 NRSV)

Jesus certainly got the part about the moth and the rust right, didn't he? Except that we now have globalized electronic moths and rust that are way more efficient and faster than anything they had back then. Moth and rust, hah! They're not the half of it now. I can't remember an Ash Wednesday when this part of the gospel reading seemed so pertinent—inevitable almost.

So we get that part of it. But what about the alternative, this heavenly treasure? How do we go about storing that up? One venerable answer, of course, is by fasting, by self-denial, by asceticism. Distance yourselves from the goods of this world, with their false, seductive ways, nasty cheating things that they are!

Well, it's not an entirely bad answer. The ability to forego immediate gratification at times can give us a freedom and confidence that's worth having—as long as it doesn't become a goal in itself.

But it's a mistake to think that self-denial by itself can store up treasure in heaven. It can actually open the door to its own set of evils. Who are the premiere ascetics of our time? Wouldn't it be those people who are prepared to give up anything whatever, even life itself, in devotion to their cause? That would include some pretty noble people, like the journalists who have tried to maintain freedom of the press in the former Soviet Union and have paid for it with their lives. It would also include suicide bombers.

Rejecting earthly treasures doesn't automatically produce heavenly ones.

So what *are* the treasures of heaven? What might we be looking to build up a bit this Lent?

There's another passage from Paul (not the one we just read this evening) that tells us that the most important thing in heaven is love [1 Cor. 13]. Paul sings the praises of faith and hope, too. But then he says that love is greater because it never ends. In heaven, we see God face to face; we don't need faith any more. In heaven, there is fulfillment; we don't need hope. But there is no fruitful and fulfilling human existence without love.

So maybe the centerpiece of Lent needs to be the cultivation of love, the multiplication of love, the sharing of love. We could start where it's often easiest. We all learn love from other people; remember to return that love.

One of those from whom we learn love is God. Some of us may know God's love through some quite direct and startling experience of the Spirit. Some of us are aware of it more through a sense of the blessings that have enriched and transformed our lives. Sometimes maybe we know it only as a kind of voice that keeps us going through difficult times. However we've encountered it, we can practice love in return by taking time to rest and delight in God during Lent, here in church and in more private contexts.

And the life of heaven means living in love with all sorts of human beings, people we've known and people we've not known, people we've liked and people we've not liked. As Jesus says somewhere, people will come from east and west to feast with us at God's table [Mt. 8:11]. We can barely imagine such a thing in this world, but we can at least remember that all sorts of people in the world share our common human need to be connected to one another by love. In some cases, they're in quite serious need of love expressed as generosity. The sharing of what earthly treasure we can share is not primarily a duty or an asceticism but an act of love that looks forward to the sharing of the life of heaven.

And, finally, we can increase the treasures of love by beginning to forgive our enemies. I'm not talking about polite denial. I'm talking about the amazing sovereign freedom we learn from God to forgive even those who have truly done us wrong. It's not easy. And we

learn to do it only in the company of God and with God's help. But this, too, is a preparation for heaven.

The purpose of Lent is to begin to live, just a bit more than last year, the life of heaven, to exchange the treasures of heaven: Loving those who love us, loving God, loving the stranger, loving the enemy.

Yes, and loving yourself, too. God loves us. Why do we spend so much time and energy questioning God's judgement? Get over it. Get used to. You must be pretty lovable after all.

Receiving love and giving it: that's the currency of heaven. This is the form in which we store up treasures in heaven. And, unlike earthly treasure, we save it as we spend it.

And it's not just a savings account to be enjoyed later. Wherever the currency of love is being spent, heaven is already present. We begin to live in it even now.

Spend this Lent in love!