

## Ash Wednesday, 2025

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; <sup>20</sup> but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:19-21)

Lutherans are, I’m told, suspicious of Lent. And it makes sense. Lent is a time of repentance marked by fasting and almsgiving, increased attention to prayer and the reading of holy Scripture and so on. It is focused, in other words, on actions. And where there is an emphasis on work, there is the temptation to self-justification. To try to earn God’s acceptance.

This concern is written into the bones of our spirituality because it is written into the bones of our founder’s own life. Commenting on his life in the monastery, Martin Luther wrote these words: He was going to earn his way to heaven if it killed him.

Not surprising then that Lutherans should turn a wary eye to all this talk about discipline during Lent. Fasting. Almsgiving. Prayer. Scripture reading. Self-examination. We’ll be reflecting on these disciplines during the Sundays of Lent. And I want to begin tonight with a short reflection on why even Lutherans should engage in these practices regularly.

First, though, let’s begin by acknowledging our Lutheran suspicion. All this stuff is just about sneaking late medieval Catholic salvation-by-works back into the church, isn’t it? Shouldn’t we be enjoying what Luther famously called “the freedom of the Christian?” Because I’m not Roman, it’s not for me to comment on alleged excesses of another branch of Christian faith some five centuries on. I will say that the notion that we can somehow impress God into

loving us by our acts of devotion is not peculiar to any Christian denomination. It is found in them all. Even Lutheran churches!

As a result, the suspicion is entirely justified. When we start talking about spiritual disciplines, and even more, when we start practicing them, the devil is sitting right on our shoulder either puffing up our pride and letting us know how godly we are or plunging us into despair, telling us we'll never be good enough. So, we're wise to be wary. So, tonight and over the Sundays of Lent, stick with Luther in his worry. Lent is not about turning us into monks and still less about saving us through what Luther calls monkery.

In short, Lent is *\*not\** about earning our salvation, becoming proud when we think we can or giving in to despair when we realize we can't. And caution that prevents us from falling into those sins (for that is what they are) is a good thing.

So what is it about?

Well, to put it in one word, Lent is about detachment. And specifically, detachment from the world. Detachment has become hip and cool in the last few years. How many of you have read books on simplifying your life by Marie Kondo, for example? I do not claim to know Ms Kondo's faith (if any), but what she teaches about the elimination of stuff is rooted in the Buddhist notion of detachment. The Buddhists tell us that the problem with human beings is that we desire and desire creates conflict and competition and conflict and competition leads to suffering. Salvation for the Buddhist—Nirvana—is attaining that place of non-suffering. To end suffering, we must end conflict and competition. To end conflict and competition, we must end desire. And to end desire, we must end the self that desires. Buddhist practices—meditation, prayer wheels, mantras—are all about the elimination of desire so that the Self can dissolve in Nirvana.

Detachment for the Christian is both like and unlike Buddhist detachment. For the Christian, detachment is not detachment from desire, but detachment from \*disordered desires\*. St. Augustine famously put it this way in the opening words of his *Confessions*. “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts will not rest until they rest in thee.” The story St. Augustine tells in the first 9 chapters of the *Confessions* is the story of a restless heart. A heart whose desire for God was filled by desires for other things—personal recognition, women, a simple, wicked delight in doing wrong. These desires needed to be reordered and so redeemed. And the first step toward reordering them is detaching from the stuff that drives them.

So, Christians fast. And we fast especially during Lent. That is, we give up \*good things\* even \*necessary things\*. The desire for good things, when it gets disordered, corrupts those things, makes them sinful. Thus C. S. Lewis in his book, *The Four Loves*: “when a good becomes a god, it becomes a demon.” Fasting from food reminds us that even food is secondary to the health of our souls for we are not designed to live by bread only, but by the Word of God.

Furthermore, Christians do not detach for detachment’s sake. We detach in order to attach to something better. We fast to displace worldly things in order that we might reorder ourselves toward God. We fast, in other words, not in order to earn God’s love, but to open ourselves more fully to it. We are “giving it up for love.”

Which brings us finally to the Gospel for this evening. “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal;<sup>20</sup> but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.<sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:19-21)

Lent is the chance—given to us out of the boundless grace and kindness of God—to break our gaze from this-worldly treasures which, though good, are doomed to pass away with this world and free our gaze to be redirected toward God, toward heaven, toward our heart's true home. For where our treasure is, there our heart will be also.