

SERMON FOR WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 18 2026

Ash Wednesday (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21)

“How is it with your Soul?” is the question John Wesley would ask at the beginning of a small group gathering. Wesley was an 18th century Anglican priest, better known as an evangelist who started the Methodist movement.

“How is it with your Soul?” This is such a personal, deep question. Educators know that you often have to warm up a small group, asking simple and safe questions to get a discussion going. Not so with Wesley, he dove deep from the very start, cutting to the chase and setting the tone for the group gatherings he led – namely, that what they were talking about was both a serious and a personal matter.

Tonight, as we begin the season of Lent, this is the question that confronts us. We start a 40-day period of time, not including Sundays, that is designed to be an intense time of self-reflection and introspection. It reminds us of the time that Jesus spent in the wilderness following his baptism, described in the gospels as a time of trial and testing. Lent seeks to strip us down, remove those distractions in our lives, and helps us focus our attentions on what really matters in our lives – the very condition of our souls. Or, to put it in the words of Jesus at the end of our text this evening, where are our hearts?

For us, the word “heart” does not really carry the weight it did in Biblical times. We associate it with Valentine’s Day and romantic love and often leave it at that. In contrast, the word “heart” appears more than a thousand times in the Bible and is seen as a comprehensive metaphor for the self.

To identify where one’s heart is means identifying what is at the center of one’s core identity and motivations in this life. What is it that drives everything else?

Our text indicates that finding the location of our hearts is as easy as looking to where our treasures are. There are many things that we treasure, aren’t there? We first think about material possessions – our homes, cars, clothing, all the “stuff” that we have surrounded ourselves with to try to make us feel happy, successful and fulfilled. Other things we treasure because of their meaningfulness to us – a family heirloom for example, a childhood teddy bear.

We can treasure non-material things, too. Whether it is a focus on physical appearance, promotions at work, our reputation, or a gift or ability. There are many things in our lives that are important to us and that we value. Lent asks us to consider which of these “treasures” might be getting in the way of our relationship with God.

To help discern this, many use these 40 days as an opportunity to deny themselves something – from chocolate to soda to Facebook. I've suggested that people use this season to literally de-clutter their closets by putting one item in a donation bag each day or collect a food item for the food bank for forty days. These can be valuable ways to help us identify what is important and where to place our time and energy. But Lent is about more than just collecting clothing or food. It is about where our heart is in all of this. The key to any of these practices of "giving things up for Lent" is to remember that by freeing ourselves from the binds of these other "treasures" in the world, we believe we might be more open to deepening our relationship with God. Our hearts have to have this intention in order to make it a spiritual practice, rather than just a self-improvement tool.

There's another way some approach Lenten disciplines, and that is by adding a spiritual practice. I heard of one person who is using these 40 days to intentionally take walks on her own and be more aware of the world around her. She intends for these walks to be a way of embodied prayer, making her slow down and spend intentional time on her spiritual life. Often, additions like these incorporate the three traditional spiritual practices of Lent – Almsgiving (or service), prayer, and fasting. These ways of living out faith have deep biblical roots and have been practiced by Christians throughout the centuries as a way of drawing closer to God. However, sometimes our best intentions for these practices end up misguided.

If we aren't careful, we turn these practices into being all about us – how pious and good we are at being Christian. They become just like treasures to us, distracting our hearts from what matters.

This is the caution Jesus is giving in the Sermon on the Mount to those who are practicing their faith in ways that are more about showing off to others than showing up with God. Lavish displays of how much money is placed in an offering plate, boasting about how much one does for the church to get the recognition of others, prayers that are over the top and meant for others to overhear (perhaps more than God), and fasting done to such an extreme that it is paraded around to garner the sympathy and respect of others. All of these examples, Jesus indicates, seem to miss the point. They have become more about the person's ego than about their relationship with God. Jesus shines the spotlight in these examples on our tendency to be self-absorbed, even in our faith practices. In these instances, the heart is misplaced in pride and self-interest.

Lent humbles us out of these ways and seeks to help us get our hearts back in the right place.

Because when we start to really look around us, we realize that our hearts are often surrounded by "treasures" that may in fact be building walls around us that close us off from God. And on top of those treasures, we see all those other instances of ways in

which we have become separated from the people God has created us to be. We notice our sinfulness, a painful reflection in the mirror and looming tower before us. On Ash Wednesday, we begin to break down those walls and are left with a mess. The dust of our mess marks us as we place ashes on our forehead. We are reminded of our sinfulness and our mortality. At the same time, though, we are marked with the cross, a reminder of whose we are, a God who not only sits on the hillside with us but went to that same cross that marks us this night *for* us, so that sin and death would never have the final word. On this night, we can be marked with a sign of death because we know that we worship a God who can overcome it. Our ashes are a witness to our belief that we cannot do this on our own – we are solely and utterly dependent on God.

In these 40 days of Lent, may we trust God to put a new and right spirit within us, so that the treasures we have in this world, and indeed our very hearts, might also be with the Lord. Amen.