

PASTORAL PRAYER

It is a brand new day, holy God. It's a new opportunity to take hold of the callings we have to be your people and to live your word. We seek to learn from the past while we move into new life every day you offer it. We recognize that while we pursue life anew, our daily lives hand us opportunities and trials that we struggle to deal with. But you are there; you are always there, especially in the places where we least expect you. Walk with us, hear those things we have said here and the things we have said in our hearts. We lift them up to you, Creator of all, and be our Guide and Shepherd, as you have always done.

Gracious God, we come to be thankful people in this time and space. The world teaches us so many things that are just downright screwed-up. God, we come to your house to be reoriented. We want to be people of thankfulness, but our humanity often gets in the way. Life gives us tasks, opportunities, and responsibilities that become bigger than the reasons why we are doing what we're doing. We can easily lose sight of what's important, as the small things become important; they become our treasure in life. They become the things where we focus our energies. Jesus told us that where our treasure is, our hearts will be also. Help us, God, to realign. Help us, God, to make you and your mission to us to be the focus. We pray all these things in the name of the one who named and calls us to faithful priorities, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying...

SERMON

Want to know what grinds my gears? The other day, I went to Starbucks and was very clear about what I wanted. I wanted a Grande Chai Tea Latte with Skim Milk and no foam. You know what they did? They gave me a Grande Chai Tea Latte with Whole Milk AND, AND left the foam on! I just can't tolerate that extra fat in the milk; I think it makes

the milk taste like cheese. Other people have to actually listen to what I say and follow through. You know, when you don't start out your day with a good beverage made EXACTLY the way you want it, then the whole day is ruined. So I threw a fit; I said, "Why can't you get anything right around here?" Thank goodness I finally got my beverage right.

Well, that really didn't happen to me, but I've heard things like this from some Starbucks goers. When something isn't exactly right with some people, they get angry. The world becomes a perfect cup of coffee. When you walk away from it, it seems petty, as it is. Sometimes you think back and wonder, "Why did I make such a big deal out of that?" It's happened to us all. We get wrapped up in what is in front of us. In the moment, the largest thing in the world is a very small thing. To everyone else, it seems miniscule. Once we gain perspective, then we will also see the same thing. Our world teaches us to focus on things that aren't of consequence, and we easily do. Then, when we take a good look at things, we realize how absolutely off-kilter we are; we can feel it. With that task completed the way we want, we don't find joy. We find emptiness; it was bankrupt. Has that happened to you? I know it has happened to me; ask my wife. On second thought, please don't.

Last week, we talked about what thankfulness is. It's not for this month; it's for the year. It's for all our lives. It's about knowing what we have, wanting what we have, and recognizing how our finite lives contribute to a faithful outlook. This week, we begin to see some of the obstacles that prevent true thankfulness. We have no ability to be thankful when life's priorities are all out of whack. Life has become a checklist, and each one of those checks takes up time, stress, and then, at the end of the day, we're not fully human anymore. Let's take a look at how unnecessarily complex life gets when we lose perspective and find some solace in Jesus Christ, who reorients us masterfully to reclaim

true priorities in these two scripture passages. Finally, we'll start to see the implications of his message in how we live our lives seeking true thankfulness.

You might think this job is one where I always maintain true focus. After all, I'm a pastor; I'm supposed to be closer to God, right? Nope; that's just flat wrong. There is no profession or task where we can't lose focus of what really matters. I can easily, as a pastor, lose sight of why I'm doing what I'm doing. There are the tasks that don't, shall we say, appeal to my gifts and passions. This last week I've found myself getting caught up in making sure that every detail of Church Conference is as it needs to be. And as my dear wife knows, details are not my forte. Sometimes they make me cranky, and when I'm cranky, I've lost perspective. Why is that? I think it's because we concentrate not on the why of what we do but the what. The what consumes our mental space and the what and the why become the same. Perspective is lost when we cannot see the bigger picture. Church Conference is not and should not be the focus of my work. Church Conference is a means through which we recognize the work and life of this congregation and ultimately further serve and glorify our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. We lose perspective when the what and why are the same. Thankfully, Jesus provides wisdom for perspective.

Let me just put it bluntly: Jesus Christ was one cool dude. He lived in a much simpler time but his words seem to get at the heart of many issues in our fast-paced and complicated society. We so easily lose focus, we lose what it means to be us with such regularity, and he strikes on it in unforgettable ways. He passes along this wisdom in two succinct statements: "What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" and "Where your treasure is, your heart will be there also." Let's unpack these two ideas and see how we find ourselves in these pitfalls.

What are our priorities? This day in age, they are often really messed up. I heard a quote by the Dalai Lama, who hit the nail right on the head about where society is going. Someone asked him what surprised him most about humanity. "Man," he said, "Because he sacrifices his health in order to make money. Then he sacrifices his money to recuperate his health. And then he is so anxious about the future that he does not enjoy the present; the result being that he does not live in the present or the future; he lives as if he is never going to die, and then dies having never really lived." The Dalai Lama speaks with the same wisdom of Christ. "What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" Culture draws us on a bandwagon that is all about status, about prestige, about amounting our self worth by measurables and tangibles. At the end of our days, when we look back at life as a whole, no one's gonna say, "Man, I wish I had worked more days in my life," or "I wish I had gotten that car that I really wanted." No, we won't be focused on those things that take us away from ourselves. We'll see that fit at Starbucks was all for naught. We will be focused on those things that made life worthwhile. Life's satisfaction, when we have everything in perspective, is about relationships, how we shared life with others, how we filled and nourished others, how many laughs we shared instead of how many stocks and bonds were in our names or checklists accomplished. "What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" asks Jesus. It's about putting first thing's first. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, strength. Love your neighbor as yourself. There's three things there, and when we abide by them, we aren't chasing after the world.

I think Jesus' second quote is also quite startling and provocative. "Where your treasure is, your heart will be there also." In bible study the other day, we were talking about daily life. Every day, we have things that we should or need to accomplish. But what

does “should” and “need to” become? They easily become the point of the day. The total of a day gets amounted to a checklist more often than we’d like to admit. When we do not fulfill the checklist, we are led to believe that it is all one big disappointment. Our day is ruined because we weren’t productive enough. When we extend this logic, we see that life is equivocated to productivity. To be productive is to be successful at life; to be non-productive is to fail. That indeed is a subtle evil. But really, what does it mean to be productive? Productivity, at its best, is a means to an end, but this culture has engrained in us that it is an end in itself. We are productive to accomplish a goal, but productivity easily becomes the goal. Productivity becomes the treasure in our lives. You know that’s the case when you finish a task, such as clean the house, and realize you’re not really satisfied at all. What once seemed like it would make you happy you find wasn’t really worthwhile at all. Where is our treasure? “Where your treasure is, your heart will be there also.” What are we chasing? Our treasure is shown in our actions, not words. We get caught up in the little things that demand our attention, then finally realize really what our treasure is. Our treasure needs to be what lasts, but our energies go into what doesn’t. We’ll see if it’s worthwhile if the “what” is not the “why,” but the “what” leads to “why.”

We hear Christ’s lessons about perspective, but aren’t innocent when we enter this building. The church is where we seek to be more God-centered people, but the church is clearly not exempt from a good re-evaluation of where our energies are going and what our priorities truly are. Sometimes we can get so focused on the little things, the daily “what’s” that we forget the bigger “why’s:” why we are here and who we are called to glorify through all of our actions and activities in these walls and beyond. Sometimes our little preferences can take away from the true perspective of this place. The word “Gospel” is

Good News, but we lose that easily; we have domesticated it to the point where “Good News” is something we hear over coffee instead of a calling that literally changes us. We zap it of all its power in this world. Remember; don’t quickly forget: God is great! God loves us, God cares for us, and God calls us to be agents of change in a complicated world. God calls us to care for our neighbors in the same way that God cares for us. These are such incredible things that we come here to recall and take into the world. These are such incredible things we must not lose. These are incredible things that call us to what’s really important in a world that has completely lost it. Christ calls us to remember: “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” At the end of the day, this message is where our treasure is meant to be. When we fully grasp that, we will know that is where our heart is.

“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Our words may say one thing, but our actions demonstrate something else. Where are we getting caught up in the little things? When we get caught up in the little things, where is our perspective? “What does it profit them to gain the whole world and to forfeit their life?” Christ continually calls us back to what is important, and that goes against the fast-paced order of this culture. Only when we stop...really stop...we gain perspective, and perspective is a rare thing in today’s world. What’s really important? Our actions, not our thoughts, make it clear where our treasure is. When it’s focused on what really lasts in being faithful students of Christ, we’ll be able to be fully thankful instead of finding that our treasure, be it completing the checklist, productivity for its own sake, or making inconsequential things so important, is bankrupt. Next week, we’ll tackle another obstacle to thankfulness, another subtle evil that takes us away from faithful living as followers of Christ. Thanks be to God for faithful perspective on lasting things that allows us to be people of thankfulness. Amen and Amen.