

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Build Anyway!

Ash Wednesday February 14th, 2018

Ash Wednesday reminds us that from dust we have come and unto dust we will return. As I thought of this I was struck by the thought that as we begin our New Vistas building Campaign that all that we will build brand new in the next few years will one day return to dust.

Our Admin. building and Ed. Building, as lovingly as they have been taken care of over the years, their useful life is coming to an end. If all returns to dust, why build? If all comes to naught, why build?

From my training as an archaeologist, I learned, even the most durable of materials eventually passes away. Bronze and Ceramic objects are the most durable and have a life span of 10,000 years, but pass away.



Now tradition has it to give up something during Lent to remind us of the transient nature of life, and make us more aware of Christ and his sufferings.

John Wesley practiced and advocated fasting on Fridays. Roman Catholics usually give up eating beef on Fridays during Lent. Fridays have been traditionally “fast” days. They eat fish instead which is why in the supermarket inserts this week there have been so many ads for fish. They even titled the section in some “Lenten Foods”.



Now a story is told about a Protestant living in a totally Roman Catholic suburb. Every Lent he would drive his Roman Catholic neighbors crazy because on Fridays he would go outdoors and BBQ beef steaks. The aroma of the cooking beef permeated the

neighborhood and drove his RC friends crazy so they all got together and decided to work to convert him.

Well it worked. He converted and on the day of his conversion the Priest said, "You were born a protestant, you were raised a protestant and now you are a Catholic." The man's neighbors were so pleased because they thought they could now observe Lent in peace.

Well the next time Lent rolled around on the first Friday they were greeted again with the enticing aroma of BBQing beef steaks. They couldn't believe it. Their friend had been instructed in the ways of their faith and Lenten observance, so they ran over to see what was going on.

As a group they got there, and just as they were peering over the fence the convert to RC said as he lifted the steak from the grill, "You were born a cow, you were raised a cow, and now you are a fish!!"

Jesus point in this scripture is for us to do our pietistic works without hypocrisy. There's just something fishy about hypocrisy.

The Jewish religious life had 3 pillars. The first was "almsgiving", (helping the poor) the second was "prayer" and the third was "fasting". Almsgiving was so important to their faith that the word that means "almsgiving" also means "righteousness." Though these were the pillars of the faith, and their focus ultimately was on God, and for serving God; lesser motives crept in and religious practice encouraged hypocrisy for those whose motive was personal aggrandizement.

For all three of these religious practices Jesus made the point that there are rewards. In fact this section ends with Jesus enjoining us to **store up treasure in heaven and not on earth**. Jesus made the point that if you do these pietistic acts such as almsgiving, prayer and fasting to be seen and "ooed" and "aahed" over by other people that "ooing" and "aahing" will be the extent of our reward. In fact a way of saying "reward" is "paid in full." Our reward will be paid in full on this earth.

The question we need to ask when we do pietistic acts is “who is our ultimate audience? Is it God or is it other human beings?” If other human beings then their response is all the reward we will get; but if it is God then our reward is stored up in heaven. The reward is eternal.

Now I am the first to admit that there are no pure motives. It feels good to do good, to help the poor, to pray up front in public, even to be noted for giving and sacrifice. But if it is for these lesser rewards only that actions are taken than those good feelings are all we get in terms of rewards.

Now at times you should do good works to be noted by others. Earlier in Matthew 5:16 Jesus said “**Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.**”

The motivation here, though, is not personal aggrandizement, but bringing glory to God. That is why I always encourage people to “do all that they do in the name of the Lord.” To attach words to our deeds so people can give glory to God. The call of Lent is to search your motives.

But anyway, for Lent the church has suggested “Fasting” of some sort...taking something away from our lives, or adding something in for the 40 days of Lent.

Now today, you really don’t have to worry about showing off fasting to others. Our culture has changed to the point that most people do not fast, or pray in public, or show off helping the poor.

Most of us are not in any danger of pride or mixed motives when it comes to fasting. But fasting would do most of us some spiritual good, if not, providing us some health benefits if we tried it.

Now my number 1 reason for fasting, or giving up something for Lent, is to keep myself focused on God. For me, during most Lenten seasons to give up sweets or deserts was a real stretch. But during Lent when I come across temptation to eat such, it reminded me to

focus on God. When we give something up or sacrifice something for the season it reminds us of Christ's sacrifice for us.

I encourage people in Lent to deliberately take on disciplines that draw us closer to the image of Christ and the service of his people.

It is good for developing self discipline. *A story is told about 2 very thin starlets in Hollywood being approached by a homeless man. The man said, "Please help me I haven't eaten in 3 days." The first starlet replied, "My God, such discipline."* And as you know the best discipline is not a forced discipline, but one you take on willingly.

Disciplines, spiritual disciplines that are good for your soul for Lent are included in the insert: one is from Mother Teresa and the other is from Pope Francis. There is much wisdom in these verses. There are things in here that if we fast from, we and world, will be a better place.

In terms of the fabric of our society if we could only do the first one on Facebook, in our words and political discourse, life in America would be a much better place:

"Fast from hurting words and say kind words."

And, "Fast from anger and be filled with patience."

Now in terms of Build Anyway, I want to refer you to the last part of the Mother Teresa poem.

**The good you do today may be forgotten tomorrow,
Do good anyway.**

**Give the world the best you have and it may never be enough.
Give your best anyway.**

God is looking for your faithfulness in the day and age in which you and I live. God wants us to build now and truly leave the future to God.

Our Revelation scripture refers to the 7 churches in Asia Minor what today we call Turkey. These seven were listed as **Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.**

These were seven actual churches with physical locations, different gifts, graces, talents and sins.



Their example spread the Word of God in their day and spreads the word of the Love of God to this day. One of the most famous scriptures is spoken to the church of Laodicea, **“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him and he with me.”** Rev. 3:20 This is one of the most beloved, comforting and compelling images of Jesus and God standing and knocking on the door of our hearts.



It is shocking to hear that none of these churches listed here exists today. The buildings are gone. Possibly ruins remains slowly turning to dust as the elements and time work their slow, grinding, destruction.

The buildings are gone, the people who brought them to life have passed on, but their message carries on. The temporal buildings of this world helped launch them to the next world the New Heaven and the New Earth.

What we are building here may only last 50, 75 or a 100 years, and one day will be gone..... so build anyway. The people who meet God here and grow into Christ’s example will live on forever.

So this Lenten season, develop your relationship with God as you support God’s physical work in the world today, God’s kingdom on earth. Give up what needs to be gone in your life and hopefully,

prayerfully you will develop a good habit that will carry you on through life.

Let us recite responsively Mother Teresa's poem and I've added a line for today.

People are often unreasonable and self-centered.
Forgive them anyway...

If you are kind people may accuse you of ulterior motives.
Be Kind anyway...

If you find happiness people may be jealous.
Be happy anyway...

The good you do today may be forgotten tomorrow,
Do good anyway...

Give the world the best you have and it may never be enough.
Give your best anyway...

For you see in the end it is between you and God
It was never between you and them anyway.

All you will build will turn to dust.
Build anyway!!

What is God saying to you and
what are you going to do? Amen

All quotations come from Dr. Barclay's commentary on Matthew 6