

Stop me if you've heard this one.

One day there was a priest who called a cab to get to church. And unfortunately, after they had driven madly to get to the church for just a little while, the cab driver crashed into a light post, killing the priest and the cab driver. And so they found themselves at the pearly gates, facing St. Peter. St. Peter, witnessing the two men and checking the accounts of their lives opened the gates and began to walk them into heaven. After sometime of passing glorious houses and beautiful vistas, they stopped in front of a grand and magnificent mansion. "Behold", said St. Peter to the cab driver, "your eternal reward." And giddy with excitement, the cab driver entered the doors of the mansion in which he would reside for eternity.

Seeing this, the priest himself grew giddy, thinking surely that if the cab driver would receive such a reward, he as a clergy person would have something all the more grand. So they walked, and after some time, St. Peter and the priest came upon a small, cute, cottage, beautiful yet certainly not so fantastic as the mansion of the cab driver. "Behold," said St. Peter to the priest, "your eternal reward." The priest, shocked but keeping his composure, spoke to St. Peter. "I do not understand, holy one. I professed scripture and preached the word, I committed my life to faith. How is it that I have but a cottage as my eternal reward whereas that cab driver has a mansion." St. Peter responded, "why, reverend, you did good works and kept the faith that is to be sure. But your sermons were not always so good, and in fact, there was more than a few occasions where your parishioners would fall asleep from boredom. You did your part for God's glory. But the cab driver? He truly served the lord. Because with him behind the wheel, EVERY passenger was praying to God.

The Gospel for this Ash Wednesday speaks of how we attain a reward that our father in Heaven will grant us, one that will be greater than anything we might have on earth that moth and rust might destroy or robber steal. And given its themes of the earth being temporal and ultimately fading away while heaven and the glory of God lasting forever, it makes sense that we read this on the day where we are dust and to dust we shall return. A reading that calls to mind the guideline of Christ that in order to gain our lives when need to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him.

But with that said, this is a story that I have found myself struggling with over the course of my life and I wonder if you might have read it the same way I have.

When I was a kid, this is the sort of story that helped me justify not retaliating and in denying myself to help other people. When I was in the second grade, I figured hey, if I give my friends their preference of games to play or if I don't respond angrily when somebody is mean to me at school, God'll hook me up with a sweet Maserati and a super Nintendo in heaven. Like the priest in my very good joke, I was fixated on how much I could earn in heaven by denying myself, and not focusing on the good in this life.

Of course, over time, I got frustrated with the notion of hiding myself or denying any sort of earthly enjoyment. There was plenty awful around me where self-denial felt like a crock. I had friends struggling with addiction and some who took their own lives. I saw couples lose children, spouses have extra marital affairs, and peers worry about the future. Fear has been part of my life as long as I can remember.

And in the midst of all this hardship in the world, the Gospel is telling me to hide myself? To not show up, to always make my needs second to others?

Well, if you don't jive with this interpretation, fear not, neither do I. All our Gospels about self-denial, about not showing off, about remembering our mortality and limitations, I don't think that they're about denying one's self just for the sake of doing so.

Rather, those readings like today's, as well as what these days of Lent are meant to be about, are about reorienting ourselves to what is important.

To be seen as superficially successful, to look like you've got it all together by having the best stuff, by appearing holy and giving, to think of yourself as better by looking young or sexy, to do anything that qualifies yourself as better than anyone...

That is what the Gospel warns us is not worth investing in. What is worth investing in is our relationships with others and the kind of person we want to be. To live our lives not merely putting on the face of

kindness, but living it out. By truly making space for both others and ourselves rather than performatively appearing just or good.

Doing so isn't always flashy or attractive. It doesn't necessarily help you accrue any societal or earthly power. But that's ok; fame and fortune may pass away. But the kindness and work we do for other persists infinitely. It adds to the well of goodness in our world, further substantiates the work of the kingdom that the hungry should not be left unfed and that the lonely should not be left loveless. This Ash Wednesday, let us remember our limit and know that this life we live will end someday. But let us defy death with Christ who promises resurrection not to the old life of rush and dust but to the new life of light and love.

You may remember plenty of good folks from this congregation, not because of their wealth but because of their love; Joe Dorchek, Harlie Youngblood, Don Bolte, Barbara Nurse, Rita Bend, Barbara Kohnhurst, Alvin Ho, names and names and memories and stories of love and even when the day comes when their names are not remembered, nor mine, nor yours, when all tongues have turned to dust... in whatever way that resurrection and heaven may look like I hope that our stories may be those of repentance and care; stories that illustrate where we both loved and learned to love better. Because there is where true, everlasting treasure lies which cannot be corrupted by time.

This season of Lent, I invite you to walk with me and help me as I try to do the same for you as we seek to love better. As Christ reminds us today, in so doing, we'll build up a treasure which none can take from us and which we can enjoy now and for eternity.