

March 9th message

Welcome to the first Sunday in Lent, 2025.

Jeanette Strandjord tells of the resistance she encountered when she tried to take her youngest daughter to different historical sites around Wisconsin. Mom was trying to teach her about her heritage and in doing so she felt her daughter would have a better understanding of where she had come from and who she was. But like most kids in their early teens it she could have cared less.

I think we can all relate to that story to certain points. Perhaps we remember when we were younger and can emphasize with this young lady. I think one has to develop an appreciation as they grow older for what our ancestors went through. Everyone is different and has their own likes and dislikes for certain things. I have a brother in law who could probably be a guide at Gettysburg national park. He is a retired air force lieutenant colonel who has loves going there and has studied every aspect of the battle there. He can spend hours at any civil war battle recounting the strategy each side has. Whereas, I usually can look around for a little bit and be content with seeing such a place.

The book of Deuteronomy begins with a review of what God has done for the nation of Israel and then continues with a review of the laws His people were to follow. In their journey with this covenant, there had been many times when the people were not obedient. Our reading today is a reminder of their past after a review of the laws for living life in this relationship.

Review and rituals happen often. They happen in the life of the church. They happen in our families. They happen in groups and organizations we are a part of. Perhaps we enjoy these times and events, perhaps we don't.

Every five years I return to my home town for my class reunion and most of the time I recognize everyone. I graduated in a class of 88. Over the years I have noticed about ½ of our class attends. Many who have stayed there don't show up, yet those whom live farther away do. Some have pleasant memories of school and

some don't. Those who don't probably don't want to see certain people and relive some of those years. I get that.

Unfortunately, I know some people who have had bad experiences at church. Some have been rubbed the wrong way by someone or the preacher and in some cases it's been much more than that. I've noticed over the years how even the smallest incident can make people find much fault in the church citing how the whole institution is flawed.

Being active in a religious institution and attending worship services on a regular basis is not that popular right now. There are many activities and organizations that are available to modern day America 24/7. Many simply do not make a closer relationship with the Lord a priority. This past week many participated in Fat Tuesday but hardly knew about Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent.

I tell of these things this morning not to be a Debby downer but to remind us of our heritage. Chances are we can trace our history back many generations and see how our ancestors did their best to follow Jesus and the many traditions that were part of that. Perhaps not, perhaps we are new to the faith, but either way as we enter this season of Lent it is good for us to remember our identity and celebrate it. Lent helps us focus on what God has done for us and our need for His grace.

Last week I attended a FFA banquet and was able to visit with some folks I hadn't seen for a while. One conversation I had with a farmer really has stayed with me. I brought up the uncertainty of the upcoming season with lack of moisture and the hold put on the farm bill. He shared with me his faith on how he has put things in God's hands. This doesn't mean he sits back and hopes for the best, but rather he is active in prayer and builds his relationship with God each and every day. Needless to say I was quite impressed by his outlook and shared that. He was quite willing to share his faith, a faith that is part of his heritage, a faith that makes him who he is.

We are living through a time when many are very quick to share their opinions about politics, about sports and coaching, the price of groceries, and almost any subject that comes up. Why can't we also be quick to share our walk with the Lord? Lent is a good time to look at our lives and realize how we have the opportunities to do so.

Our gospel reading that I've chosen for today is part of the Ash Wednesday lectionary. Matthew records these teachings from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. This reading comes after Jesus speaks on giving to the needy, prayer, and fasting. We may look at what Jesus is saying about moths and rust and identify with how rust can corrode and destroy metal.

When I was in high school auto mechanics my project for the year was to repaint my car, a 68 mustang. Those of us who lived through those years remember how cars and trucks used to rust out much faster than they do today. Part of the work involved was to cut out the rust and replace it with new metal and bondo. Either I didn't get all the rust or it kept spreading as the weeks and months went by. I can remember the shop teacher saying how he'd never seen a car rust so quickly.

So yes, we are familiar with this kind of rust, but Jesus was referring to a rust that literally means an eating away of what one has. One sign of wealth at the time was how much grain one could store away for future use. Often mice and rats would find their way into such storage and it would be destroyed. Some versions of this verse like the one I read today from the New International Version actually say vermin instead of rust. Jesus is not condemning the need to plan ahead; rather He tells how to concentrate on the things that last. It was the same with expensive clothes in time and area where moths were a real problem.

Many lived in homes of nothing more than baked clay for walls. If one accumulated much of value it was easy for thieves to break in and steal. The King James Version includes the words 'dig through' emphasizing how this was a problem.

Today of course we usually lock up things pretty tight but if someone decides to get it they will probably find a way. We all know locks serve as a deterrent. It has been said the locks just keep honest people out.

Jesus essentially has three kinds of warnings here. The first has to do with things that simply wear out, like clothes. Sometimes I hang on to some too long and the wife will say, "You're not going to wear that out in public, are you?" I'm guessing I'm not the only one who hears that. In Jesus' time people had far fewer possessions than we do, yet the implications are the same. Jesus emphasized not building one's life around clothes or anything that loses its value. These are good words for us to hear in our consumer driven society. We get something new but then as time goes on the value diminishes unless of course you kept that old muscle car or first ford bronco or that 68 mustang.....

All of us who may have taken an econ class may remember something called the law of diminishing returns. Simply stated this means benefits gained from something will represent a proportionally smaller gain as more money or energy is invested in it. Jesus has his own take on this when he tells not to put too much importance on things that don't last. Along with the lesson on possessions losing their value, we have the lesson how what we store up erodes away or can be stolen in one way or another.

Rather Jesus teaches how one should build their life accumulating treasures in heaven. A common Jewish belief at the time how one's character was connected to the phrase, "treasure in heaven." A well-known saying at the time was, 'in the hour of a man's departure neither silver, nor gold, nor precious stones accompany him, for there are no pockets in a shroud.' Jesus tells how we should set our hearts on eternal values then we will not place too much importance on the things of this world. One never knows when their time on this earth will be over.

I guess one time there was a pastor standing by the side of the road holding up a sign that read, "The End is near! Turn yourself around now before it's too late!" He planned to hold up the sign to each passing car.

“Leave me alone you religious nut!” yelled the first driver as he sped by. From around the curve he heard screeching tires and followed by the sound of a car plunging into water.

I wonder, thought the preacher to himself, if I should have made a sign that said ‘Bridge Out’ instead?”

To close up these thoughts Jesus focuses how we view things. The amount of light that enters a room for example, depends on the window. If it is covered or dirty less light enters. Jesus is warning about things that darken how we view other people and our possessions. If one’s vision is hindered by prejudice, jealousy or self-conceit even in a small way, one’s perception is clouded.

Without going into a lot of detail, the original Greek word used here to describe light has its root in our word generosity. This applies to how we view others and the actions we take in our everyday lives. We are living in a time that is known as the information age. We have so much available to us about any subject, some true, some false, much of it distorted. It can be so easy to be led astray. Jesus cautions us not to allow the darkness to enter into our lives.

These teachings of Christ are part of our heritage. No matter the times we are living through I want to emphasize how what Jesus taught is now just as important as ever. While I don’t want to end on a sad note, I would like to share a story that I have mentioned before. It’s by a man named Russell Moore. Russell was a denominational leader in one of America’s oldest well established denominations. He became very concerned in what he was hearing from many of the pastors he served. He has since moved on and is now editor and chief of the magazine Christianity Today.

He tells of conversations with pastors and discussions they had with their members that were often like, "Where did you get those talking points?" And the pastor would say, "I'm quoting Jesus Christ from the Sermon on the Mount," the response would not be, "I apologize." The response would be, "Yes, but that doesn't work anymore. That's weak." He comments on how when we get to the

point where the teachings of Jesus himself are seen as subversive to us, then we're in a crisis.

Lent is here. May God help us in our examination of our walk with Him. May our spiritual lives be strengthened. Amen.