

March 6, 2019

Christ and St. Luke's, Norfolk, VA

Ash Wednesday (RCL/C)

A Lenten Meditation by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

Never before have people spent more energy and time planning for their future, particularly for their financial futures. On a near daily basis we are told that we need to save for retirement. We are told to stash something away in case of some unforeseen crisis down the road. So we build up a nest egg, and along the way manage to accumulate a fair number of things as well, as a means of ensuring our own security. But how much is enough?

Oseola McCarty was an African American woman from Hattiesburg, Mississippi. She left school after the sixth grade to take care of a relative who was sick, and after that she went to work as a washerwoman. For seventy-five years, McCarty washed and ironed and folded the laundry of the well-to-do bankers, lawyers, and doctors in town. She earned just pennies, but tried to put away whatever she could, eventually starting up a little savings account at the First Mississippi National Bank. McCarty lived a simple life. Her treasures on earth were few. She lived in a modest frame house, just blocks from the campus of the University of Southern Mississippi. She didn't get an air conditioner until she was well up in her eighties, and only turned it on when she had company. She never owned a car. She walked a mile each way to and from the grocery store. She went on Sundays to the Friendship Baptist Church, carrying a Bible held together with Scotch tape. When she got to be eighty-seven, her hands gnarled with arthritis, McCarty had to retire. She began to put her affairs in order and decide what she wanted to do with the little she had been able to accumulate. In 1995, the development office of the University of Southern Mississippi received a phone call from the bank. The bank representative said that they had a check for the University from an Oseola McCarty— a check for \$ 150,000.

No one at the school had even heard of Oseola McCarty. As far as they knew, she'd never set foot on the campus. This washerwoman who'd never been to high school, let alone college, gave away virtually every dollar she had ever made for a scholarship fund for minority students. The gift made front-page headlines. McCarty was invited to the White House and was even awarded an honorary degree from Harvard.

In an interview shortly before she died, she was asked why she hadn't spend the money she'd earned on herself. She smiled. "I am spending it on myself," she said.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus' message is that the island earth on which we live is not our "home" and therefore should not be the storage place for our treasures. I don't always know

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/08/13/us/all-she-has-150000-is-going-to-a-university.html>, accessed March 5, 2019.

exactly what Jesus had in mind when he said that we should store up for ourselves treasures in heaven; but I suspect that Oseola McCarty did know just what Jesus meant.

Jesus is teaching his disciples about an extravagant form of behavior that may not be in our nature. In fact, the behavior Jesus expects of his followers may even be counter to our nature.

The overall theme we have heard in our scripture is about our financial treasures, and then some. Also the message is about prayer, praying in your closet, fasting - with weeping, and repentance, in sackcloth and ashes. This emphasis has a dramatic impact because it is, for most of us, a counter-to-the-ordinary experience.

By and large the Christian faith is a faith of celebration. Our Sunday and daily Eucharists are times of celebration. We raise our voices and our hands and, giving thanks for God's gifts, celebrate the wonder and splendor of what we have received. As we celebrate, we are continually anticipating the ultimate future of our blessings through the end-of-time relationship with God which was established through his Son. Over and over again we remind ourselves and one another that we will be in an eternal relationship with God. That is the obvious Christian theme.

As people of faith our relationship with ourselves and with others begins with our relationship with God. This emphasis upon our relationship with God is what separates this Ash Wednesday passage of scripture from being a mere self-help exercise that we do once each year.

The less than obvious theme that will, if we let it, jolt us back into the present is an emphasis upon the HERE and NOW. Right HERE, right NOW, at this very moment, we are being called to examine the quality of our three dimension life of relationships: with your self, with others and with God. We are called to look at these relationships right NOW. //