

What does God require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. — Micah 6:8

Where Is Your Treasure?

I was at a meeting at another congregation recently when something bizarre happened. I saw the host clergy person, a woman who is a dear friend, and I approached her with my arms open to give a hug that we always exchange when seeing one another. Only she didn't move toward me as I expected. Instead, she leaned back with a look of concern on her face. I quickly dropped my arms and tried to pretend nothing had happened. We engaged in small talk for about thirty seconds when I noticed something familiar. She was talking to me the same way I talk to people when I vaguely recognize them but can't figure out who they are. Finally, I saw the light of recognition go off in her eyes and she said, "So, how are things at Pullen?"

Yes, I have lost a lot of weight. It is only in moments like I had with my clergy friend, though, that it strikes me how much my appearance has changed. The reactions I have received from people vary from "you look much younger" to "you look different—do you have more grey hair?" One person speculated about cancer, which I am glad to say is not true. So, let me try and answer a few of the common questions I get every day.

I have lost about eighty pounds. I was just a biscuit short of 300 when I started trying to lose weight late last summer. I went to a doctor who specializes in bariatric medicine and he put me on a modified liquid diet. For three months most of my calories came through protein shakes. I am now eating real food again and trying to learn healthier eating patterns. It's not easy. I have been obese for more than fifteen years. I know the odds are against me when it comes to maintaining my current weight. That may sound defeatist, but I'm trying to live in the real world and not kid myself about the challenges ahead of me.

I wish I had written about this subject years ago before I lost the weight. By doing so now it appears that I am saying, "Look at me, I've successfully beaten my obesity and want congratulations for it." Except that I don't. I feel very much the same as I did six months ago or six years ago. Physically I am healthier and in less pain, but inside I am still the same person. Which is why all of the attention I have received feels odd. I'm truly grateful for the many supportive comments people have lavished on me, but deep down I think "It's just me, Jack, the same person you knew before."

If all of this sounds a tad defensive it is only because it is. There is a particular shame that haunts those of us who struggle

with our weight. We know that we are viewed as less attractive, undisciplined, poor examples for others, and a burden on the healthcare system. We spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about how much we weigh, wishing we could be thin, and despising ourselves when we continue in patterns that keep us trapped in obesity. Whatever scorn we feel from those who judge our weight problem is only a fraction of the self-loathing that we heap upon ourselves.

I have tremendous sympathy for those who are overweight. In a culture that says fat is ugly and thin is beautiful, obese people remain easy targets for discrimination and rejection. It seems there is more understanding in our society for people who struggle with drug and alcohol addiction than those who cannot control their eating. We have learned in recent years that those who are addicted to chemicals are battling a disease. We still think of fat people as lazy and repugnant.

What these attitudes cost us is the joy of discovering the value hidden in each overweight person. Some of us are natural leaders; some of us are graceful athletes; some of us are remarkably disciplined in numerous ways. Underneath the surface we are real people, with real gifts, and to be discounted by our appearance is a tragic loss for everyone.

The season of Lent has just begun. Our Lenten theme this year is "Where Is Your Treasure?" It comes from Matthew 6:21: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." What we value in this world says a lot about where our focus is. Too much emphasis on external appearance can make us shallow and insensitive. The true treasures in life lie below the surface and have to be sought after to be discovered.

I hope I remember that wisdom regardless of how much I weigh.

—Jack