

MESSAGE: “Where Is Your Treasure?”

Text: Matthew 6:19-21

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to identify ‘treasure’ in our lives and reflect on its eternal value.

Introduction

Max, our beloved canine, a Tibetan Shih Tzu, has a blanket for a treasure. Actually, it may be more accurate to say that he *had* a blanket for a treasure (hold up scrap of blanket). He loved his blanket so much that he carried it everywhere and chewed upon it relentlessly. Now, only shreds of blanket remain, but, to Max, these shreds are irreplaceable. I snuck this one from the house this morning when he wasn’t looking. Frequently, he will carry a blanket-shred to the top of the art room easy chair where he sits enthroned, and ‘guard’ his treasure. He glares at his Westie brothers and other passers-by, daring them to make a move. He begins to growl a deep, threatening warning that cautions, “Don’t tread on my blanket-shred. It is mine and you better not take it!”

Sometimes he gets a rise out of sight-challenged Jaxon, who can’t abide a low bubble of a growl, but more often than not, the Westies ignore Max’s dramatics. A blanket-shred just doesn’t have that much appeal.

Transition: We chuckle at the antics of a Max, religiously guarding his blanket-shred, but we, too, watch over our treasures with great devotion. We polish them, stare at them, collect and catalogue them. We put them on display or lock them in a safe. We ‘guard’ the numbers to make sure they increase rather than decrease. We give them a curfew and make sure they are asleep when they should be. We exercise and try to stay fit. We growl at anyone who threatens what we value. We are convinced they must want it like we do, but to them it may be nothing more than a blanket-shred.

In his revolutionary Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke of the temporal nature of ‘earthly treasure.’ He counseled, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume and thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.”

What sort of treasures do moth and rust consume? A month ago, my older son asked me to join him in Portland to tour an exhibit of artifacts recovered from the Titanic. Pictures of the pristine original accompanied their rust-consumed counterpart. The difference was sobering. The ship was impressive by all accounts, thought to be unsinkable, yet there it sleeps at the bottom of the Atlantic. Within a generation, much of it will have disintegrated completely. At the beginning of the exhibit, my son and I were given the names and

biographical notes of actual passengers bound for North America. I was an 18-year-old who had recently had an argument with my 'Nana.' I sent a note ahead, apologizing for my behavior and promising 'to never sass Nana again.' By tour's end, I discovered I never would, for icy waves became my grave.

Jesus told of a man who stored a bumper crop of harvest in his barn. Proud of his accomplishment, he decided he would plant more, tear down the barn, and build a bigger one so that he could sit back and enjoy the retirement fruits of his labor. Yet that very night his life was forfeited. What value to him did that bumper crop have?

Is Jesus teaching, then, that it is wrong to have stuff, or to maintain a savings account, or to exercise and eat a balanced diet as a way of prolonging one's life? No, not at all. Throughout his teaching, he emphasizes the importance of building upon a secure foundation with scriptural integrity, stewardship and responsibility. He gives us the key in the passage we began with, "Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy and thieves do not break in and steal."

Ok, so how do we do that? What exactly are 'treasures in heaven?' How can we make deposits with our substance that benefit from eternal security? Let me start with a simple example. A friend of mine sustained an accident with her automobile and the car was totaled. Actually, to be more precise, the title of the car was under her husband's name, and she trembled as she reached in the glove-box for her registration, imagining his reaction to the news. The envelope contained the registration, insurance information, and a note which she had never noticed before. It said, "In case of accident, remember, it is you I love—not the car." Kindness and love—treasures that begin on earth, but translate to heaven itself.

Jesus understood the difference between an earthly copy and a heavenly original. The temple of Solomon, blessed by the earthly presence of God, the pride and joy of Israel's golden age had been destroyed in the Babylonian invasion. During the restoration following exile, the tradition of synagogue had emerged to support worship and study of Torah. A second temple was build, the temple of Herod. This was the temple Jesus' accusers referenced when they reported, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with hands, and in three days I will build another not made with hands.'" He spoke of his resurrected body, the embodiment of God's presence. The temple was an earthly treasure; God's Word made flesh in Jesus—that was a heavenly treasure.

I'll never forget my first preaching assignment in my seminary homiletics class. I was given the task of preaching a thanksgiving sermon in the rubble of a sanctuary, destroyed by tornado the previous day in a storm that claimed the lives of several parishioners,

including young children. Think about that for a moment. (pause) What would you say? Where is thanksgiving to be found in such a tragedy? Nevertheless, the preaching occasion parallels, somewhat, the first recorded thanksgiving of the Pilgrims. Most of their company had perished, yet they gathered, in their grief, to give thanks. Can it be that *thanksgiving* is a heavenly treasure?

Here's the thing. Earthly treasure does not endure, but earthly resources can be marshaled in heavenly purpose through sharing: tithes, offerings, pledges, gifts and missional service. Think of giving as a spiritual muscle. To be healthy in spirit, we practice generosity. Jesus reminds us that, "where our treasure is, there our heart is also." That is why many of us want to leave bequests to our children after we die. They have our heart, so we want them to also have our treasure.

OK, well and good, but if we are to store up heavenly treasure, then we place our earthly treasure in God's service. Like any muscle we want to remain healthy and strong, our giving must be stretched. Giving the easy amount may silence our conscience, but it will not grow our faith, and it will not translate into heavenly treasure. That is why we invite you to 'grow one step.' Not because God will be impoverished without it, but rather because you will. And to be candid, that spiritual principle of giving holds true not only for millionaires, but also for folks on a fixed income. We all need a chance to grow into God's best.

John Wesley, the father of the Methodist movement, grew giving muscle throughout his ministry. When he began, he gave a tithe, 10% of his income, to God's work. By the end of his ministry, he still had what he needed, but was able to give over half of his income to God's work. He accomplished this by following three simple rules: earn all you can, save all you can and give all you can. Incidentally, by 'save' all you can, he meant 'do not be wasteful.'

We began this message with Max's treasure, a blanket shred. I once had a 4-year-old parishioner who's Mom and Dad wanted him to give up his blanket which was torn, threadbare and unsanitary. One Sunday, after the offering plate was placed on the altar, he made his way forward, and with tears on his cheeks and a trembling hand, he put his blanket in the offering plate as a gift to God. I'm not sure how the Financial Secretary recorded the gift, but I suspect God treasures that gift in his heart to this day.