

WHERE IS YOUR TREASURE?

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J Lawson

1 Timothy 6:17-19
Matthew 6:19-21

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This past Monday, two days before he would board a plane to begin his journey home to the States, Peter called me one last time from Kuwait. We talked about a variety of things, but our conversation ended up focusing on the details of his next military transition. The one that will transition him from chaplain of the 28th Division of the PA Army National Guard to the Army National Guard Liaison to the Pentagon. This job transition will involve moving from a three floor townhouse in Harrisburg, PA to a small, one-bedroom condo in Washington DC. The condo is the same one he lived in several years ago, not long after he first settled into fulltime military work at the National Guard Bureau in Arlington, VA.

As we talked about this transition the issue we ended up dwelling on was his "stuff." What are we going to do with his "stuff"! The condo will hold maybe one fourth of the furniture he has at the townhouse in Harrisburg and even if we move a few items to the parsonage, there's going to be a good bit of extra stuff. So, even though we don't have all the details figured out, the one conclusion we came to is that we have too much stuff, and for the first time in our lives, we will likely need to look into a storage unit.

I guess one good thing for us is that we shouldn't have a problem finding storage. There is about 2.3 billion square feet of rentable self-storage space in the United States. In fact, 90% of all storage facilities world-wide are located right here in our country. With such statistics, it's not hard to conclude that we Americans not only have more stuff, we are much more concerned about storing our stuff than the rest of the world. We even have television shows like Spike TV's Auction Hunters and the wildly popular A&E show Storage Wars that are based on stuff that has been stored and then abandoned. There may not be another country in the world that has enough storage units to allow for the production of a regular airing show based on such a premise.

So, we might as well admit that we all have stuff, and some of us have so much stuff that our homes can't hold it all. This message is not actually an indictment on stuff. In fact, much of our stuff is quite helpful. The couches, the beds, the refrigerator, the washing machine and dryer all go to good use. And even those special things we tuck away in boxes, boxes that end up in our closets, attics and basements, are worth keeping because of their treasured memories of special people and life's milestones. But even though stuff is our reality, Jesus challenges us to understand that the stuff is not actually our treasure.

It's in the Gospel of Luke (12:13-21) that Jesus tells us about a certain rich man whose crops produced such an abundance that he had to figure out what to do with all the extra. What he decided to do was build bigger storage barns to hold all his "grain and goods." "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." (Luke 12:20-21) Having an abundant yield was not a bad thing; biblically, God was and still is the giver of such blessings. However, the man's decision to keep it for himself reveals a complete misunderstanding of true richness.

In the nineteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus had an encounter with a rich young man who wanted to know how to gain eternal life. He was basically a good man who faithfully adhered to the 10 Commandments, but then Jesus said to him, "Go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, then come, follow me." (Mt. 19:21) That young man with many possessions chose not to follow Jesus, instead, "he went away grieving." (Mt. 19:22) He sadly chose to walk away from real treasure.

But in contrast to these two examples is a tax-collector named Zaccheus. Do you happen to remember what happened the day Jesus showed up in Zaccheus' home town of Jericho? Jesus walked right up to the tree Zaccheus had climbed and told him to come down so that he could go to his house. There were no instructions to Zaccheus about how he needed to change his life, but with a joy that could not be contained Zaccheus blurted out, "Half my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." (Luke 19:8) Do you remember Jesus' response? He simply said, "Today, salvation has come to this house..." (Lk 19:9)

I could easily fill my message today with scriptural stories and quotes from Jesus that pertain to our attitude towards stuff. And that's because Jesus had a lot to say about the topic. In fact, he talked about money and possessions more than he talked about heaven and hell combined. Jesus talked more about money and possessions than anything except for the Kingdom of God. If Jesus talked about "stuff" that much, then it's obviously very important that we understand the point he is making.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus consistently points to a much greater purpose for our lives than accumulating "stuff" in the temporary homes we live in on earth. What Jesus cares about most is our hearts. And the reason he talks so much about money and treasure is because he knows that such things directly affect, and can even control our hearts. There is a fundamental connection between our spiritual lives and how we think about and handle money, so even though we may try to separate our faith and our finances, God considers them inseparable.

And so Jesus chose stories and shared lessons about true treasure that challenge us to see our lives as having a much higher purpose than acquiring "stuff." In some ways, this may seem a very obvious conclusion for followers of Jesus, but if we honestly consider where we spend the majority of our time and money, then we likely need to admit the Jesus' challenge is a difficult one for each and every one of us. You see, Jesus knows that what we spend our time and money on becomes our treasure. That's why he said, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Mt. 6:21) Financial commitments have a way of pulling our heart in directions that neither we nor God intended. If we buy a house that requires a large percentage of our income, we have no choice but to invest time, energy and money into paying for it. Those things we invest in most reveal what is most important to us, and eventually, those things tend to gain the allegiance of our heart.

Jesus also says, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where 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." (Mt. 6:19-20) Is it because all those earthly treasures are bad that we shouldn't store them up? Our passage does not actually say they are bad, however, it does emphasize that earthly treasures don't last.

So when Jesus warns us not to store up treasures on earth, it's not because wealth **might** be lost; it **will** be lost. Either it leaves us while we live, or we leave it

when we die. There are no exceptions to that reality. There are investment experts whose job it is to read signs when it comes to things like the economy and stock market. They consider downward trends and they recommend switching funds to more dependable investments. Jesus is like an investment expert who is instructing us to transfer our funds from earth, which is a volatile and temporary place, to heaven, which is a dependable place that is fully insured by God. And whereas our long-term financial forecast for earth is bleak, all forecasts regarding heavenly investment is eternally positive.

As a pastor, I have often had the opportunity and privilege to be with people in their last days of life. Rarely in those last moments do people talk about the things they have acquired on earth – you know, the kind of treasure that moth and rust can destroy, the kind that thieves can break in and steal. People in their last moments talk about their family and friends. They talk about children who touched their lives and children they had a privilege to care for and teach. They talk about experiences with God, and about missions and ministries in which they engaged. They talk about vacations and moments of laughter and surprise. They share stories that are amusing and meaningful. They talk about tragedies overcome and healing in the midst of pain. In my experience, even though there may be financial concerns for spouses and family members left behind, the focus is not on salaries and portfolios. The focus is on experiences shared and promises kept with God and others.

Our passage from Matthew shows us that Jesus is not against the storing up of treasures. Actually, he's all for it! He just wants us to stop storing up the wrong things in the wrong place. Storing up heavenly treasures is not about stuff, and it can never be about ourselves alone. Storing up heavenly treasure is all about loving and serving God and others. These are the things that moth and rust cannot affect and thieves cannot steal. In Jesus' many teachings about treasure, he consistently tries to move our focus away from the temporal so that we can focus instead on that which is eternal.

Each and every day offers us opportunities to love and serve in ways that point people to our great God. But today, we have a very particular opportunity. Because this is financial commitment Sunday for the year that lies ahead, I place before you the annual challenge to invest yourself in the ministries of the UMC of Chagrin Falls. If you take seriously what Jesus says, then today's opportunity is not only an investment in the ways that this church will love and serve God and others in 2019, it is also an opportunity for eternal investment.

As I conclude my message, I leave you with these words from 1 Timothy, "...do not set your hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides you with everything for your enjoyment. Do good, be rich in good works, generous and ready to share, thus storing up for yourselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that you may take hold of the life that really is life." (1 Timothy 6:17-19, paraphrase)

I now invite you into a time of prayerful meditation as the music begins. When you are ready to present your commitment card to God, come forward and place your envelope in the basket. If you are a visitor today, please do not be concerned about participating in the following act of financial commitment, but instead take this time to consider the ways in which you are personally investing in heavenly treasure.