

Rev. Julie Belman
October 8, 2017 - Stewardship week 1

Matthew 6:19-21

“Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don’t eat them and where thieves don’t break in and steal them. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Treasure Series, week 1

My friends, what do you treasure? What do you hold most dear in this world?

When I asked this question of our Thursday evening bible study, most responses went something like, “the things I treasure most probably aren’t things... I treasure friends, family, relationships.... I can’t think of a single possession that I can’t live without.” We all easily agreed that what is most important to us was NOT our material possessions. Of course I was teased a little about how much I treasure my shoe collection! And that’s okay - we all have our vices!

But seriously, what do I treasure? What do I hold most dear on this earth?
That I can tell you in 5 words: Jesus, Travis, James, Raymond, Marlow.

But then, on Friday morning, I visited Carly, a friend and colleague whose Grandfather died this week, and I asked her the same question: what do you treasure? Carly had a very different answer. Carly said her “things” give her a great deal of comfort. She spoke of a few treasured items in a very sacramental way. I got a picture in my mind of a few items of beauty — possessions that held deep meaning for Carly — symbols of treasured relationships. I pictured Carly having a cup of tea in her favorite rocking chair while reflecting on memories that are important to her. Carly’s answer re-shaped my own response to that question.

Anya, a little girl I met on a mission trip in Paraguay 10 years ago, made me a clay vase to hold the wildflowers we had picked together. I still have it today, because that vase is a treasure. On my bedside table sits a small silver frame. In it is a picture of my father holding his newborn grandson, James, for the very first time. That picture is a treasure. Laying across the top of my dresser is the necklace my Grandma Dot wore to Ray and Marlow’s baptism. That necklace is a treasure too.

So, let me ask you again, what do you treasure?

Google told me that there is 2.3 billion square feet of rentable self-storage in the US. We have so much stuff that our homes can't hold it all. Have you ever seen that tv show Storage Wars? Apparently people have so much stuff that they forget what's in those storage lockers – and in this show, people bid on the contents, sight unseen, hoping for a big payout.

As a pastor, I have had a number of opportunities to be with people who are in their last days – even the last moments of their lives. I can't remember a single time when someone has talked about STUFF – you know, the kind of treasure that moth and rust can consume, the kind that thieves can break in and steal, or that greedy bargain hunters can bid on.

When my own father was dying, he took every opportunity to hear the voices of those he loved. He watched videos of sweet baby James cooing and babbling. His brother, who lives in Phoenix, and couldn't get here in person - called every day to check in. To say, "I love you." One of his last requests of me was to sing through the Fiddler on the Roof soundtrack while sitting at his hospital bedside.

Think of your family. Do have one of those stories that really makes no sense to anyone who weren't there, and yet a few words of recall can make your whole family erupt into such joyful laughter that tears stream down your face? Those are moments and memories to be treasured.

What do you treasure?

My friends, during the month of October, we are centering worship and study around this concept of "Treasure." This series is about where we are investing our lives, but there's no denying that it's also about money. We will be ending the series with commitment Sunday on October 28, encouraging everyone to make a commitment to giving to God's work through our congregation.

I know that people don't always like it when we talk about money. However, Jesus talked about money. A LOT. In fact, he talked more about money than about heaven and hell combined. He talked about money more than anything else except the Kingdom of God. Eleven of Jesus' 39 parables are about money. One of every seven verses in the Gospel of Luke talks about money. Why did Jesus talk so much about money? Because he cared about our hearts.

Our text today is a part of the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew chapters 5-7, it is the longest continuous teaching of Jesus found in the whole Bible. In this teaching, we see that Jesus is looking at the heart. He cares about the hearts of God's people. Jesus talks about money and treasure because he knows that they affect our hearts. He knows money stresses our relationships. Money causes division in and among people. Money and its pursuit can be all-consuming and burdensome. Those who have lost jobs, or find money scarce, will tell you that it is not just a financial issue but an emotional and spiritual one. Jesus talks about money because he cares about our hearts.

We usually think that where our heart is, our treasure will follow. Jesus says that it is the opposite. Where our treasure is, there our heart will be also. My friends, this is not just a change in semantics. Jesus knows that the place where we spend our time, energy and money will become our treasure, whether we want it to or not. When you put your treasure into anything, your heart will follow.

Billy Graham was asked late in his life, "If you could, would you go back and do anything differently?" His answer may surprise you. He said, "Yes, of course. I'd spend more time at home with my family. I'd study more, and preach less. I wouldn't have taken so many speaking engagements. . . . Whenever I counsel someone who feels called to be an evangelist, I always urge them to guard their time carefully, and not feel like they have to do everything."¹ Does any one here feel like they have to do everything? BE everything to every one? I do sometimes.

Right now, I want to invite you to spend a moment in silent reflection. For just this moment, lay aside your debts and your current commitments. Looking into the future, if you had a totally blank slate, where would you choose to store up your treasure? Where would you invest your time, talent, and money?

My guess would be that what you just imagined tells what you treasure. That those investments reflect the deepest desires of your heart.

And, now – take a moment to assess realistically where your treasure currently is... Do you feel your heart divided?

Jesus tells us we have the opportunity to lay up treasure in heaven. When we are investing our lives in the things of God, we find that our hearts no longer feel disconnected from God but rather are in unity with God.

¹ *Treasure*, Jacob Armstrong

What beginning steps can you take to lay up treasure in heaven?

My friends, we have an opportunity today: To be forgiven of our sins and have grace poured out for us. For God to wipe clean the slate that counts all the times we have stored up the treasures of humanity instead of the offerings of heaven... When we have valued earthly possessions over eternal rewards. I invite you to come to the communion table today with an open heart and repentant spirit, ready to receive the new life Christ offers to all who believe.

Today we are celebrating World Communion Sunday. World Communion Sunday dates back to the beginning of WW II, when a federation of churches decided to respond to the divided world at that time with a spirit of UNITY in the body of Jesus Christ. And ya'll - how much do we still need that today? Especially today, following a week that has divided our nation on so many levels — we find ourselves in need of God's unifying grace, and the great hope he offers to all who believe.

Hear the Good News: God's love is poured out to us in this simple meal. God's love is gifted to us through this loaf of bread, this cup of juice. And NOTHING in the world can separate us from this love. My friends, today, more than ever, we MUST believe that God's love is big enough for everyone.

Imagine what this world would be like if we dared to trust in God's infinite grace more than our own. Imagine what we could DO if we moved beyond seeing only the needs in front of us to seeing the abundant blessings God has given us. Imagine how many lives would be changed if we each treated our relationship with Jesus Christ as essential to life as all the treasures that fill our storage bins. May it be so... and may today be a new start for us, as we seek to align our hearts with the heart of God. Amen?

LET US PRAY: Lord, today you invite us to your table once again. May we humbly approach this, your throne of grace, with hearts ready to say "YES!" Ready to believe in your transforming love, for us, and for everyone else. And may we leave the table today ready to bring about your kingdom here on earth, here at Bethel and everywhere we go. Amen.