

“Treasure”
Luke 12:16-20

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And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a certain rich man was very productive. "And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' "And he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 'And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.'" "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?' "So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

Over the past couple of weeks together we have been considering what the Bible has to say to us during this economic downturn. We have brushed up on anxiety and self-absorption; we have considered coveting and idolatry. Today we turn to ‘treasure’.

The word ‘treasure’ appears only about 40 times in the entire Bible, and just a little more than a handful of times in the Gospels. The way the Bible uses this word, though, is very, very interesting. The Greek word which is translated into English as ‘treasure’ is a word, a participle actually, that means ‘things placed into tomorrow’. In other words, things set aside for a rainy day. In short, things that are hoarded.

Dr. Will Willimon, former chaplain at Duke University, once told about inviting a group of students to his home on the first Sunday of the school year. They had enjoyed a nice picnic. Some lingered to shoot hoops or to talk. He sat on the patio with one student, who said to him, “Dr. Willimon, thanks for having us over to your home. This is the first time I’ve ever been in a faculty home”.

Willimon responded that he thought that was a disgrace. He added that he thought faculty should have students over to their homes as much as possible.

“Well, few faculty think that way, I can tell you,” said the student. “And you have a beautiful home,” he said. “Let me ask you, do you feel at all guilty being a Christian and living in such a nice house?”

Willimon soon remembered why he thought it wasn’t such a great idea to have people over to the house.¹

¹ Story drawn from “Jesus Visits the Hamptons” in Sojourners Magazine, March-April, 2002.

Will Willimon went on to become a Methodist bishop. He continues to be a well known and beloved preacher and writer. I guess he still has a really nice house. I guess even Bishop Willimon is not immune to hoarding up a little treasure, but the man sure can preach.

Whatever we may think about who Jesus was, whatever we may say about "What Would Jesus Do?", it is impossible to have much of a debate about what Jesus thought about hoarding up treasure. Jesus thought people who did this were in trouble.

We see it in the story of the rich young ruler. Jesus looked at that man and loved him. *"One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."* (Mark 10:21) The man couldn't do it. Jesus saw right through him and could see he was a hoarder.

We see it in the story of the rich man and Lazarus. We see it in the "eye of the needle" saying. *It is harder for a rich man to enter heaven than for a camel to get through the eye of a needle.* And friends, the eye of the needle was NOT a gate in Jerusalem!

We see it when Jesus gives marching orders to his disciples: *Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys* (Luke 12:33).

And we see it here in this lone parable that appears only in the gospel of Luke. Luke has been ramping up to this particular parable for quite some time, covering such popular topics as who is our neighbor (it's the nearly dead guy on the side of the road), not filling ourselves up with busyness in the name of God (the Martha/Mary story), cutting the Pharisees and the lawyers down to size, and warning against being a hypocrite. Luke is really on a roll here, and we all find ourselves squirming in our collective seats, or pulpits, as the case may be.

This is yet another one of those examples of "the gospel is bad news before it is good news". Another one of those times where we are reminded the gospel comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.

The question I find myself asking as we look into this text is the question I hope we can all begin to seriously ask ourselves. What are we hoarding?

Last week we talked about the cultural reasons why we keep building bigger and bigger barns. We touched on the spiritual reasons, too (emptiness, insecurity, greed, human nature). Today I want to talk some theology. Understanding a bit about what is called Theological Anthropology can help us here.

There is a deep and primitive reason for our quick abandon of the demanding gospel of Jesus Christ and our easy devotion to filling up bigger and bigger barns with things that are not God. It has to do with ignorance of, and maybe denial of, how we were created. It has to do with denying who we were created to be in relationship with.

The theologians call this concept the ‘imago dei’, which means, literally, the image of God. The image of God that is part of our very DNA. I guess we could call it our ‘dei DNA’ (our God DNA), and that would really throw the creationists for a loop. But I getting off subject here. I am giving you an ‘off ramp’ out of this sermon and I am going to need to build another ‘on ramp’ real fast.

The imago dei. Because we are created in the image of God, there is a void inside us that cries out for God. It is a longing, a restlessness, a yearning we often mistake for something else. A void we often try to fill up with something else. We spend a lot of effort filling our God-shaped void with things that are not God. It doesn’t work. It’s like putting a square peg in a round hole. It doesn’t fit. It drops out. We just keep looking for more pegs.

It’s like putting food into our bodies that doesn’t belong there, food that’s not really food. There’s something to that. Some recent scientific study found that all the junk food we eat actually doesn’t satisfy or fill us up. It leaves us craving more and more. The body knows what is good food and what is not.

The great sinner, Bishop Augustine of Hippo was talking about the ‘imago dei’ when he said, “our hearts are restless until they rest in you, O God.” Only God can fill our emptiness. Only God can assuage our worry. Only God can calm our restless hearts. Only God can be our treasure. Until we recognize and really succumb to the fact that we were created in God’s image, and we were created to be in relationship with God, we will continue hoarding the wrong kind of treasure.

The stakes are high for God. So high Jesus makes a particularly unusual point in this parable. God steps into this parable and actually talks directly to the man. This doesn’t happen in any other of the dozens of gospel parables.

Peter Thea Jones has a provocative term for the rich fool’s approach to life. The rich fool might say he’s always believed in God, but when it comes to managing his life, dealing with possessions and planning for the future, he lives as though there were no God. Jones calls this “Practical Atheism”.² A sobering thought.

The great John Calvin (whose 500th birthday is coming up July 10---mark your calendars!) was a firm believer of the sovereignty of God and a great

² Cited in the NIB Commentary on Luke 12:13-21, p. 257.

communicator about our place relative to God. Mincing no words, Calvin put it succinctly: “**God** is the author and preserver of man’s life; goods are not”.³

What’s the alternative to hoarding up treasure? It is this. Discovering the true treasure that can only be found in God, discovering kingdom treasure. It is worth everything we have, everything we are, everything we can possibly give.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Matt 13:44)

The words of Jesus are like an arrow that moves straight toward its target, Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also (Matt 6:19-21).

The Word of God is sitting right here, right now, in the middle of our congregation. Every one of us has to decide what we are going to do. No one said it was going to be easy. It’s not something you can just decide, once and for all. You have to live into it. You have to decide, again and again and again.

Nevertheless, the choice is clear. We can hoard treasure that thieves can break into, or we can treasure God.

³ John Calvin, Geneva Notes on Luke 12:15.