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“Our Ultimate Concern”

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Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-34

Where is your heart? This is a big question Jesus is asking in the 12th chapter of Luke. Where is your heart?

The answer comes when we identify what our treasure is.

A couple of weeks ago, my heart and my treasure were in Pickens, South Carolina. My heart and treasure were on Biltmore Drive where the house I grew up in sits on a dead-end street in the middle of a hill with a wooded creek at the bottom, my mom’s flower garden in the back, my dad’s vegetable garden at the top, and memories in every nook and cranny and around every bend.

A couple of weeks ago, my heart was in Pickens, South Carolina because my treasure was being sold to a young family with three young kids, after having been owned by my parents for 42 years. I didn’t go back to see it again this summer, but I talked at length with my dad the day of the closing, before he did the final walk-through with the realtors, before he and Mom signed the papers that turned my childhood home over to another family with other children. My heart broke a little that day, and I shed a few tears because saying goodbye to places we have loved is never easy.

Ten years ago, my mom had an even more difficult goodbye to say to a place she loved, when the bulldozers came in and tore her old home place down to build a

parking lot. When I asked her how it made her feel, she acknowledged the grief that she was feeling, but she said, “Mindy, it isn’t the house that I treasure. It’s the memories we made in the house. It’s the love we shared in the house. And those things are still with me. A house is just a house. It’s just a thing and things come and go. But the love my family shared, the faith we grew up with and were shaped by, those things stay. Those things are our real treasures.”

Two weeks ago, I echoed those same words to my dad as we talked that day, reiterating the fact that the memories we made there would be ours to take with us in our hearts. We celebrated the fact that three new children would now have the joy of playing in the creek, catching crawdads and salamanders, climbing trees, building forts, hiding in the secret closet under the stairs in my old bedroom, enjoying the fruits of the garden around the family dining table, singing around the piano, laughing together, crying together, growing together. The faith and love built in that house is the real treasure and that is really where my heart is. This I know and for this I am grateful for.

In the twelfth chapter of Luke, Jesus wants us to re-examine where our treasure is. He connects our patterns of hoarding and accumulation (like the rich fool who built bigger barns to hold all of his stuff) to our fear, anxiety, and ultimately our lack of trust in God. In his speaking, he wants his disciples and those around him to examine their lives and seek to understand why they are afraid and why they are anxious when the God of love has already given them the kingdom! “Do not be afraid, little flock,” he says, as a shepherd to his sheep. “Do not fear,” he says, in the same way the angels have said it over and over again throughout scripture to God’s trembling people. “Do not be afraid,” Jesus says to us, because he knows that we are.

What do we have to be afraid of, though?

A lot.

We fear failure. We strive for success as the world defines it and become desperate when we cannot achieve it. We cling to that which defines us as successful—a job,

a house, a car, a title, a degree—and we treasure these things for the identity they give us and often despair when we lose them.

We also fear abandonment and rejection. We fear being left by those we love. In our fear we cling more tightly; we cling in unhealthy ways. Or we act like we don't care, like we don't need the love of others. We forget to trust God. We forget that our greatest treasure is God's love for us.

We also fear being out of control. We control everything we can and live in the illusion that we are in control, constantly terrified that something is going to give, that something is going to break and we won't be able to do anything about it.

In our current political climate, we realize that many people are voting out of fear: fear of losing power, fear of change, fear of terrorism, fear of not being heard.

We fear plenty of other things, too, like being alone, growing old, being in pain, dying. Much of what we fear haunts us, torments us, and prevents us from being in a full and deep relationship with God, prevents us from claiming the treasure that has been given us in God's love and care for us.

In our fear, we cling to things we think we have control over, particularly money, but also other tangible things. We sometimes identify ourselves (or others identify us) by what we own—our house, our car, our collections, our stuff—instead of who we love or the fact that we are loved by God.

I can't help but think of a story that happened years ago in Indiana when a woman was buried in her beloved red Cadillac convertible. She bought 14 plots at the local cemetery and made sure everything was arranged ahead of time. A local news article described how it would happen:

“The casket is going to be placed on the back of the car. The top's down, so it will just be placed on that, across the back,” said a spokesman for Rullman Funeral Home. A construction company dug a grave large enough for the car. The Cadillac was lifted with a crane and placed into a vault, which

measured 27 feet by 12 feet and was 6 feet deep. Schuck, a native of Cuba, died of cancer at age 62.¹

Jesus says, “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

Years ago, theologian Paul Tillich argued that whatever was one’s ultimate concern, that would be one’s god, one’s idol, and would receive one’s ultimate allegiance. This makes sense with our passage for today. When Jesus says, “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,” he knows that what we treasure is what we love and what we love is our ultimate concern and what is our ultimate concern becomes our god, receives our worship and allegiance. Too often, this is something other than God our creator, redeemer and sustainer.

What is it for us that takes up this space in our hearts and minds? Is it work? Is it a relationship with another? Is it ourselves? Is it our money? Is it our fear of change, our fear of what is happening in the world that we can’t control? Whatever it is that occupies our time, our energy, our hearts and our minds, that will be our treasure beyond anything else, that will be our ultimate concern, that will be our god.

In today’s passage, Jesus reminds us that anxiety need not take center stage for us, and our treasure should not be earthly treasure. Jesus reminds us that God has already given us the kingdom. We should live in every assurance of God’s love and care for us. In doing so, we are given the freedom to share our resources with others, which is what it means to give alms. We are free to fill our heavenly purses with the fruits of the Spirit—treasures that last—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, generosity, and self-control.

Our greatest treasure is God’s relationship with us, and anything else should be held onto loosely and always understood in relationship to God and that great love. When our treasure is God, our hearts rest in God, and we are guided by the love of Christ our shepherd—and wholly able to be who we were created to be.

¹ http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/1989-11-11/news/8911113064_1_cadillac-schuck-funeral-home, August 5, 2016.

Peter Gomes once wrote,

The one who is rich toward God, Jesus says, is the one who recognizes here and now that treasure is not in what one has, or even in what one leaves or gives away, or even in what one does. Those are not riches. Treasure is in who one is, and ultimately that treasure is defined in terms of the relationship one has with God. Treasure is knowing that one belongs not to self, or to work or vocation, or ambition, but that one belongs to God. You don't belong to your talent or to your skill or identity in the world. Treasure is knowing that you belong to God; treasure is knowing that therefore you are not alone. You are not isolated, you are not on your own. Treasure is in knowing that you are loved and that you love because you are loved, and that knowledge of self and relationship and purpose is what treasure is all about. Treasure means rich in relationship to God, that which the world cannot give and which therefore the world and all of its adversities and all of its trials and tribulations cannot take away. The one who would then be truly rich is the one who cultivates that treasure, that knowledge, and who does so with all of the effort that other people use to cultivate earthly but perishable goods. So that when you leave "everything," as we all most certainly will leave everything, you can take "it" with you, for it is the only thing you ever truly had, and that is the love of God.²

To God be the glory. Alleluia. Amen.

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² Peter Gomes, *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, "When Too Much Is Not Enough," (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1998), p. 67.