

Date: November 14, 2004

SUNDAY: Ordinary 33 (Consecration)

SERMON: Treasures of the Heart

Text(s): 2 Corinthians 8:1-15; Luke 12:13-34

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A family was on their way to church one Sunday, and the mother decided it was time to begin passing on some important spiritual values to her seven year-old daughter. She gave her a dollar bill and a quarter. And she told her little girl, "One of these is for you, and the other one is for Jesus, so when they take up the offering in Sunday School today, you choose which one you want to give to Jesus, and put it in the offering."

As they were on their way home later, the mother asked her daughter which of the two pieces of money she had given to Jesus and which she had kept for herself. The little girl replied, "Well, I was going to give the dollar bill to Jesus, but then the teacher said that God loves a cheerful giver, and I knew I'd be a lot more cheerful if I had the dollar, so I gave the quarter."

Apparently, some spiritual values are more easily taught than others. But the seven year-old's attitude toward giving seems to be widely shared these days, particularly in the wealthier countries. The Lilly Foundation funded a study focused on the period from 1968-1985, when the average per-capita income in the United States, *after taxes and inflation*, increased by 31%. During that same period, the giving per member in churches decreased by 8.5%. Sylvia Ronsvalle, co-founder of the research organization, said, "People are objectively richer, but the wealth is not expanding the ministry of the church." Further, the study discovered, a much higher percentage of the giving was being retained within the local congregation for its own operating budget instead of being used in mission projects or to expand the congregation's outreach. (*Christianity Today*, Sept. 2, 1988, p. 47) That trend, unfortunately, has continued.

A *U.S. News and World Report* survey in 1991, had even more shocking statistics. They

discovered that the poorest households in America, gave on the average, 5.5% of their income to charity. The richest households, by contrast, gave a mere 2.9%. The article in the *Portland Herald* this week (Nov. 11) confirmed that this disparity still exists and extended it beyond individual households to states. According to the Catalogue for Philanthropy's 2004 Generosity Index, the richest state in the country, Connecticut, has the lowest charitable giving, while the poorest, Mississippi, has the highest. Maine ranks 32 on the list, slightly ahead of the rest of New England which is at the bottom of the list. However, in the average donation claimed on tax returns, Maine ranks dead last.

It seems as though many people who have money are making the same decision that little girl made—that they will be more cheerful if they keep most of their money for themselves.

The main reason that we have a stewardship campaign once or twice a year in the church, is not primarily because we need the money to operate the church, to keep the doors open, to pay for heat and electricity, to pay the staff salaries and make repairs to the plumbing. All of that's true, of course, and it's all important. Like any other institution, the church needs a certain amount of money to enable it to do its work. But as important as the financial needs of the church are, they are not the primary reason why we take up an offering every Sunday in our worship or have special times in the year that we call Stewardship Campaigns or Pledge drives.

The more important reason, as that mother knew and was trying to help her little daughter understand, is that our relationship to money, as Christians, is integrally tied in to our relationship to God and to our own self-identity. Anything that is so central to our lives and with as much power as money has, must be treated very carefully and thoughtfully. Which is why Jesus said, as we heard in our gospel lesson today, "*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*" We are what we value most.

We see this relationship between ourselves and money and God illuminated for us in Jesus' parable of the rich fool which St. Luke tells us, and in the sayings of Jesus about money which he links to it.

The setting for the parable itself is a request made to Jesus by someone in his entourage. A man says to him, "*Teacher, order my brother to divide the inheritance with me.*" At first glance, this appears to be a rather straightforward appeal to Jesus to encourage justice by an elder brother towards a younger one. But the context in which Luke sets this parable gives it a different slant. He has positioned it just after some sayings of Jesus in which he encourages his followers not to be fearful about their security because God's care for them is so great that even the hairs of their heads are numbered. And the story is followed by this parable of the rich fool and a collection of Jesus' sayings about the dangers of trusting in wealth for security and meaning in life. Seen in that context, the man's request for Jesus to intervene in his family dispute over an inheritance illuminates his view of what is real and ultimate in life. For this man, as for many people, reality, and therefore security, is defined by his possessions. What is real is what can be counted, hoarded, invested, and put in the bank. That's what you can depend on. He's an example of those whom Jesus describes as "*worried about life, what you will eat or what you will wear.*" And his quest for that monetary security pits him against his own brother. It puts him into a competitive rather than a loving relationship with his own flesh-and-blood. How many families do you know that have been torn apart over questions of inheritances—precious human relationships sacrificed on the altar of possessions?

So Jesus warns the man against falling into the clutches of trusting in money for his security. "*Watch out!* Jesus exclaims, "*Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.*" He then

tells the parable of the rich fool to illustrate where trusting in possessions for security ultimately leads.

In response to a superabundant harvest one year the rich farmer shows neither gratitude nor recognition that this abundant harvest has come to him as a gift. There's no room for the needs of his less fortunate neighbors in his response. It's all self-glorification and self-indulgence. "*I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my self, 'Self, you have ample goods laid up for many years. Relax, eat, drink, and be merry.'*" But God said to him, "*You fool! This very night your life is demanded of you, and then whose possessions will all these things be?*"

The rich man is a fool, not because he has been successful in business and has amassed some wealth. He is a fool because he thinks that he is a self-made man. He is a fool because he does not realize his deep dependence upon God for every breath he draws. He's a fool because he doesn't trust that God's care for him means that the very hairs on his head are numbered, because the only numbers he cares about are the numbers on the bottom line of his balance sheet. He is a fool because his hoarding of his treasure for himself alienates him from the need of others around him, and thus from his own essential humanity. He is the perfect example of the simple statement of Jesus with which St. Luke ends this passage. "*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*" His heart, his humanity, is locked up in the vaults with his money. His trust is in his treasure, and his treasure is fool's gold.

What a different picture we get from St. Paul's appeal to the Corinthian Christians in today's epistle lesson! When Paul became aware of the poverty and destitution and outright famine that the Christians in Judea were suffering while he was out planting churches around the Mediterranean, he immediately began what may

have been the first Christian relief program. He began taking up a special relief offering in all the churches he had founded.

Paul strongly believed that the Body of Christ was one. “When one member suffers, all suffer,” he said. He doesn’t make his appeal apologetically. “I really hate to ask, but if you think you might be able to spare just a bit from some corner of your church budget and give it to the poor Christians in Jerusalem, I’d really be grateful.” No, his attitude is anything but apologetic. He appeals to the relatively wealthy Corinthians to follow the lead of their much poorer brothers and sisters in Macedonia, who out of their love for Christ and their belief in the oneness of the Body of Christ, have overflowed in generosity to give to this offering.

He doesn’t berate the Corinthians for being stingy or tight-fisted. Rather, he appeals to the motivation that ought to be at the basis of all giving: “*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,*” he says, “*that though he was rich, yet for your sakes, he became poor, so that by his poverty, you might be rich.*” That’s why talk about money is appropriate in a worship service. That’s why offerings are, and always have been, central to the true worship of God. An offering is a response of gratitude to a God who has already given us everything in Jesus Christ. An offering proclaims our awareness that we are not self-made people; we are God-loved and God-blessed people. Giving—generous, open-handed giving—proclaims that the treasure on which we set our hearts and trust for the security of our lives is not the sort that can be counted and hoarded and invested in the market. Rather, our true treasure is the security and the freedom from anxiety that trust in God brings us, and the recovery of our essential humanity as we discover our connectedness to others around us.

Wouldn’t it be a wonderful thing if when the Finance Committee and Treasurer begin to put together next year’s budget, and look at what anticipated revenue from giving by the members

of the congregation, they would discover to their great surprise that we could not only keep the lights on and the building heated and the staff salaries paid, but we could really begin to turn our dreams into reality? Wouldn’t it be great if we promised enough of our heart’s treasures to fund a targeted ministry to youth and college students? Wouldn’t it be terrific if instead of having to scrounge to find bits and pieces of loose change in corners of our budget in order to fund our church social worker Jane Newhall’s ministry to the homeless and destitute of this community as we have been doing, we could really commit an amount that would show our caring in a substantial way? Wouldn’t it be exciting if in the current discussions among the other churches in town and with other community insitutions like Tedford Shelter, First Parish could take the lead in addressing the ever more pressing issue of affordable housing? Wouldn’t it warm all of our hearts to be able to expand our outreach to the poor in Central America so that we could begin sending teams to Costa Rica as well as El Salvador? None of those things is beyond our reach. None of them have to remain only dreams. All of them can become realities, if . . .if we’re willing to make those things our hearts’ treasures and open our hands to give generously and sacrificially of our money.

And I can testify that when we do that—when we set our hearts on the true treasures of generosity and compassion and service to others, then we will not only never have to worry about meeting a budget; we’ll discover what that mother wanted to teach her little girl: that giving makes us much more cheerful than hoarding for ourselves.