

“DEDICATED TO HOLY USE”

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Scripture: Deut 8:7-18, 2 Cor 9:6-15, & meditation: Luke 12:34



It isn't often that one preaches on the "meditation" phrase at the top of the bulletin, rather than the scripture readings. But today I'm going to at least use that as a touchstone. In Luke 12:34, Jesus says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." But remember, he prefaces that statement with "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

And actually, I printed those verses, not for the treasure/heart phrase, but for the tie-in with the Psalm we just sang together. It's entitled a Psalm of Thanksgiving, and our refrain was "We are his people, the flock of the Lord." "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." For anyone who learned a minimum of Psalms, either in liturgy or choir or church school, Psalm 100 was undoubtedly one of them.

- 1 Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.
- 2 Worship the LORD with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.
- 3 Know that the LORD is God.
It is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.
- 4 Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.
- 5 For the LORD is good;
God's steadfast love endures forever,
and God's faithfulness to all generations.

"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Our treasure is in the promises of God. The Kingdom or Reign of God – the ways of God – are not of this world. There are no CEO benefits. There are no soup lines. There is no one foreclosing on your house. And all tears will be wiped away.

At almost every funeral or memorial service, I include these opening words of comfort:

The eternal God is your dwelling place,
& underneath are the everlasting arms. (Deut 33:27)

God is our dwelling place? What an interesting concept. God is spirit, and those who worship God in spirit and in truth.

These are intangibles. No loan agreements. Not even an estimate-of-giving card. No Thanksgiving basket to a faceless family in need. No . . . we are promised the Kingdom of God, the abundance of God, not on loan, not on approval, but freely given. And we are all equally gathered, face-to-face, around that great groaning board at the Heavenly Banquet.

So, whether you're feeling thankful or anxious this season – whether you are healthy or struggling for every breath – whether your dinner table will be laden or spare – whether there are painfully empty seats or more people than chairs . . . deep inside, know this . . . ***your treasure is not here.***

Your treasure is **intangible**. And **eternal**. And **abundant**.

Sometimes it takes a little child to bring these things home to us. In every nursery school this past week, or in the coming week, children are asked what they are thankful for. What are the answers? Well, they often include: family, friends, food, pets – sometimes even siblings!

But one of our little ones, one who is not here this morning, prepared this Thanksgiving turkey of construction paper and wrote on it, "I am thankful for God." — And a little child shall lead them.

But that little child has been molded by her church school and extended care and Vacation Bible School teachers. And her parents have nurtured her, as they have been nurtured in this church family. And that speaks volumes of where the heart of this congregation is. (It chokes me up.)

I'd like to read a few comments by folk more astute than I – comments that pointed me toward the hearts & treasures scripture for this morning. There are three authors represented here, but I'm stringing them all together as one.

Stewardship is never neutral. Ultimately, stewardship asks the question, "What do we really care about?" [And] none of the identity markers that say we are people of faith is more important than a community's heart-centered desire to know and to be like Christ.¹

Referring to the conversion of St. Paul, one author writes,

Paul's way of describing his conversion has memorably been called the "audit of Jesus Christ," and it resonates today. Is gain we have experienced in life true gain? Are our losses in life true losses? Does the stock market index our value as human beings? **Does the budget index the faith of the church?** In Christ, assets become losses and losses become assets, in ways that are sometimes clear only years hence.²

There's a story where it was immediately apparent that the loss became an asset. You may have heard about it a few years back. It was the 2nd game of a softball double-header between Central Washington University and Western Oregon University. They were fighting for the Great Northwest Athletic Conference championship.

As a senior at Western Oregon, it was Sara Tucholsky's last chance to be in a championship winning game. She had never hit a home run. But in the top of the 2nd inning, with 2 runners on base, she hit the ball out of the park!

In the chaos of everyone cheering as the two runners came in, it took a while to notice - where's Sara? In her excitement, she had failed to touch 1st base, so she quickly turned back. But her pivot leg didn't pivot with her, and she tore her ACL. In pain, she crawled back & was hugging 1st base - far from her 1st & only home run.

If anyone on her team touched her - she would be called out. And, although the umpire ruled incorrectly, his ruling stated that if her coach put someone in for Sara, it would be counted as only a 2-run single.

That's when Central Washington's Mallory Holtman, a player with more runs than anyone in conference history, went to the umpire and asked if they could pick her up and round the bases. She asked Sarah, who said yes & thank you. Mallory said "you hit the ball over the fence and you deserve it." So Mallory & Liz Wallace carried her, stopping to touch each base gently with her left foot, giving her a three-run home run for the last "at bat" of her career.

Mallory and her team lost that game 4 to 2.

Sara lost the rest of her season, the rest of her career.

But those losses gave the opportunity for a gain that was unexpected, intangible, and more powerful than just winning a game.

Tucholsky, Holtman, and Wallace, together, won the 2008 Best Moment ESPY Award.

And Mallory is now the softball coach for Central Washington University,

This is what I'd like us to think about. Thanksgiving is an opportunity — an opportunity to remember what is important, to remember the intangible — the spiritual, if you will — gifts that are ours in Jesus Christ.

And stewardship is also an opportunity — an opportunity to open our eyes "to see that, even more important than the familiar element of *sacrifice*, true stewardship carries a huge element of *liberation*. By saying what we really care about, we are freed to jettison the other items that simply drag down our spirit and clutter our lives. Liberating stewardship decisions range from deciding to clean out the garage to mustering the conviction to say no to the" forces in society that demean the vulnerable and marginalized and despoil the environment.³ Just as de-cluttering is an opportunity for a certain kind of freedom, de-cluttering our priorities can do the same for our lives and our ministry together.

I titled this sermon "Dedicated to Holy Use", and that is indeed what we will do today. We will dedicate our offerings, our pledges for 2012, and the growth of our \$1 talents from last week. I took the phrase from today's Affirmation of Faith, but I found a story about Theresa of Avila which illustrates it beautifully. It is said that she found it difficult to reconcile the vastness of the life of the spirit with the mundane tasks of her Carmelite convent . . . washing pots, sweeping floors, folding laundry. At some point of grace, however, the mundane became for her a sort of prayer, a way she could experience her ever-present connection to the divine pattern which is the source of life. And then she began to see the face of God in the folded sheets.

Rachel Naomi Remen, in *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, observes that people can most easily recognize mystery when it presents itself in dramatic ways . . . healings, angelic visitations, life-altering coincidences, the miracles within the Gospel stories. But we can see only what we have grown an eye to see. Some of us can only notice miracles. Some of us can only see in times of crisis. Yet we can all learn to see God in the folded

sheets.⁴ Or in the one-dollar bills, or in the commitment of an estimate of giving, or in grace said around the Thanksgiving table – face to face with those we love . . . and some folk who require a certain bit of Christian tolerance!

Let us celebrate opportunities, and look for them with new eyes.

And let us rejoice in the abundance of God's grace,
and celebrate a true Thanksgiving!

Let us pray:

Holy One, we pray that you may awaken us to the workings of your will in our midst.

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ENDNOTES

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1. Douglas S. Stivison, "Where My Heart Is", *The Living Pulpit*, July-September 2006, p. 1, and Jill Y. Crainshaw, "Pastoral Perspective on Philippians 3:4b-14" in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 4, p. 136.
 2. Nathan Eddy, "Homiletical Perspective on Philippians 3:4b-14" in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 4, p. 137.
 3. Stivison.
 4. Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal*, (NY: Riverhead Books), 1996, pp. 282-283,