

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, October 30, 2022

Matthew 6:19-21

We're going to continue in our worship series this day. We will be in the midst of the gospels asking ourselves the question why give. If you're joining us for the first time this day, then you are unaware that we are making our way through a worship series in Finding Our Why. We, for each of the last seven weeks, have asked a different why question. I hope that if you're joining us for the first time this week, it is because last week's sermon on why we invite maybe prompted someone in your circle to invite you to this place. I had lots of folks talking last week about who they felt like the spirit might be leading them to invite. And so my hope is that if you haven't already done that, you'll do that sometime soon. Today we ask the question why give, and we will read together from the gospel lesson at the beginning of the 19th verse. This is just a couple of brief verses. The words of Jesus are a very purposeful message for us around what it looks like to navigate treasure in our world.

Jesus says this:

‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.’

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

If you happen to have gotten an invitation from somebody, or if you happen to have stumbled into our church this day—just a little caveat as we begin, we don't talk about money every Sunday here, but it is a significant and important part of how we understand discipleship. And so if you come back next week, we're going to be celebrating Commitment Sunday; and then the month of November, All Saints Day, and then we'll be in the lectionary together during that time. But what we realize from this, this short lesson, this purposeful lesson, is that our savior, that Jesus, wants people to think deeply about treasure. Jesus is matter of fact, just a couple verses here, to the point. I like this from Jesus. I like when he goes straight to the point. Sometimes I really like to hear long and involved stories, parables that teach us a lesson, that come in from the side door, right; and then there are other times when Jesus doesn't worry about any of that stuff, and he gets right to the point. It says do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth. If you do that, it will easily be destroyed. Moths and vermin, they're going to come in and destroy it. You might not even notice it. But here's what the destruction looks like. You've begun, you begin to have a different relationship with treasure and wealth in your heart. It's not that, necessarily, the coin or the paper dollar gets eaten and destroyed. It's more so that that which is inside you where you find value and worth and meaning, it is, it is impacted when we decide as a people to live from a place of scarcity, to store up here on earth. Jesus instead is teaching, uh teaching that there's a

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different way, indeed a different place for one to store one's wealth. Treasure on earth or earthly treasure—that will not lead to our flourishing, and then treasure in heaven. What a peculiar idea! If we read it literally and don't take a lot of time, we might think this sounds to us like a 401k that we are...we're stashing away for some later time, an investment that Jesus is encouraging his people to embark upon. He's a wealth manager in these few verses; and he is, but it's a different kind of wealth. Jesus is not, he is not encouraging the people with a type of return that they might imagine. In fact, the return on their investment, their ROI, is going to be many years in the future. They won't even know it, but there will be something that happens within them, a matter of the heart, it turns out. There will be something when they decide to invest in the kingdom of God, to store up treasures in Heaven, that will impact the way they move through the world. Jesus doesn't get really specific here, but later he'll talk about it; and even later Paul will talk about generosity as a fruit of the spirit of God, something nurtured within us, something that is planted within us. Yes, we have it by virtue of being created by God, but something that needs nurturing and feeding. It needs encouragement in order to grow within us. Jesus calls this treasures in Heaven. And what he is saying is that the decisions that we make with our treasure, or the early hearers of this word of Jesus, these decisions will have an impact on the type of heart that we carry into the world.

Our heart will be based in generosity and in hopefulness, or we might carry with us a fear and a worry--whether there is enough for us and for all of creation. So we asked this question of why give because it's really important for us to wrestle with this question of generosity, especially in a world that is...is more and more consumed with the fear of scarcity, especially in this season. Why is it necessary to find treasure within our lives and then to give it away, to store it up in a different place than within ourselves? I can't give you the answer necessarily, and that's not really the point of this whole series; but what I can do is point out at least a few things that Jesus seems to be alluding to here.

When we decide to not keep our treasure to ourselves and instead to store it up in heaven, as Jesus says, then we are contributing to God's vision, God's dreams for the world. This way of being that we believe we are going to live into over time, we are making an investment there; and if we study scripture enough then that dream, that vision, is one of grace, it is one of forgiveness, it is one of love, it's one where all are invited in, and all are provided for. None hunger, scripture tells us; none search for shelter, scripture tells us. That is the vision of the beloved kingdom that Jesus already has in mind early in the Gospels. The people have no idea what that is going to look like for them, but Jesus knows that there is this place to which all of creation is moving, built on equity and love and hope. And so when we store up treasure, we are indeed contributing to bringing about that kingdom of heaven. The other thing that Jesus leaves the people with is this refrain that 'where our treasure is, there our heart will be also'—a warning, but also an encouragement. It's not just an indictment. I don't think Jesus is only saying where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. I don't think that's necessarily the tone that he has here. He...he has more of an invitational tone to it, an eyes opening tone to it. You have to understand, people of God, where you place your treasure, that's where your heart is going to be. The world's not going to tell you that. It's just going to happen to you.

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Where you make your investment, how you go about sharing your treasure, that's where also you will find your heart. It turns out that nothing reveals our heart in this passage more so than how and where we place our treasure.

Every spring in Atlanta, at Emory University's graduation, one senior is awarded the McMullan prize. The McMullan Prize is chosen by a select committee of faculty and senior students. They pick one student, who demonstrates great academic achievement and great character. The recipient is a closely guarded secret and is announced during the graduation ceremony. The winner of the prize, the McMullan Prize, receives a check for twenty-five thousand dollars, no strings attached. The prize winner is always mentioned in the Atlanta Journal Constitution, but a few years ago the prize winner along with someone else, they made the front page. It's unusual for the news outlet to dedicate the front page of the Sunday AJC to the McMullan Prize winner, but there's a story that accompanied the prize winner that year. Robbie Brown and Elizabeth Schulty, they were on the front page. Robbie and Elizabeth were both graduating seniors from Emory, one from Ithaca, New York, the other from Atlanta. Robbie and Elizabeth had met a couple of years earlier during their studies at Emory. They were on their way in a shuttle to Hartsfield-Jackson Airport to pick up some prospective students. They were going to be student ambassadors. So if you're visiting colleges right now, then you know what it is like to meet those students. Well, they were two of those students. On the way to the airport, Elizabeth, who had just returned from a year studying in Mumbai, told Robbie about a project that she had initiated there during her year of going to classes in Mumbai. Elizabeth became friends with the children who were unhoused, living in the neighborhood around her international student dormitory. Truth be told, Elizabeth spent more time that year with the children than she did studying. That spring when she returned to Ithaca, she asked her parents and grandparents and friends that if they were planning to give her any money for her birthday or for Christmas or even graduation, she would be grateful to have an advance on that gift, because she wanted to start a foundation to adopt some of the children that she had gotten to know in Mumbai.

At any given time, the government in India estimates that there are over 37 000 children living on the streets there. With the money she received, nearly five thousand dollars, she was able to purchase a flat in Mumbai and hire four women with a living wage to live there and care for eight girls that she adopted. According to the state, Elizabeth is the mother of eight girls ages four through ten. She told Robbie this story on their way to the airport to meet the prospective students. She even gave him a brochure that had pictures of the girls.

At commencement the following May, Robbie Brown was named the McMullan Prize winner to a standing ovation. He went up to the platform and received an engraved plaque with his name on it and an envelope with a check for twenty five thousand dollars. He returned to a seat on the field. Then the graduates began to be called, and each one received their diploma. Robbie being B went early. He was sitting there watching as different folks made their way across the stage, and then Elizabeth Marie Schulty made her way across the stage, and Robbie remembered that conversation in the van from a previous time here. After commencement was over Robbie stood up and worked his way across the field to the section of the students whose last names began with S. Eventually, he found Elizabeth. He tapped her on the shoulder. She turned around

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and...and he said, "Hey, I don't know if you remember me," and Elizabeth interrupted and said, "Of course I remember you. You just won the McMullan Prize. Congratulations!" She gave him a big hug. He said, "Yeah thanks, I appreciate that. Hey, do you remember when we met last fall on that van ride to the airport?" Elizabeth said yes. He said, "How's the foundation that you started? How's it going?" "It's going great, actually. I've applied," Elizabeth said, "for tons of grant money and have some really good prospects coming in." Robbie said, "That's wonderful," and he handed her a note. She said thanks. He went back to his seat with the Bs.

Elizabeth, later that afternoon after the celebration had quieted down, she made her way back to her dorm just to change clothes before she headed to dinner with her family; and she felt that note in her pocket. She had almost forgotten about it. She decided to open it then. When she opened it, there was a check in it from Emory University made out to Robert Allen Brown in the amount of twenty five thousand dollars, and on the back of the check he had endorsed it with a simple note "Make payable to Elizabeth Schultzy Foundation. Then underneath it he had written "Get more kids."

It turns out that where our treasure is, there our heart will be also.

We give to church, because when we do we get this privilege of participating in God's faithful work in our midst. We give because when we do, our hearts are nurtured to be more generous and more faithful. We give because it turns out that there is a certain way in which to store treasure where it can be destroyed, or less so the treasure itself being destroyed, our most inward intimate places cannot be nurtured in the way they need to be.

So that in sharing our treasure, our hearts draw closer to God and each other.

Here's what we don't know from this passage. We don't know what the people who heard that story, what sort of treasure they had. We don't get a rundown of their bank accounts. Jesus isn't worried about that, it doesn't seem like. He's worried about their hearts and the heart of the community that they will be a part of in the future.

He is very concerned with them that the way that they use and invest their treasure be the sort of investment that will bear out a community that is generous and kind and hopeful and grace-filled and not built on scarcity or worry, but built upon the belief that God indeed gifts treasure that it might be used for the building up of the kingdom of God.

For seven weeks we have asked ourselves the question why. Why worship, why study, why serve, why pray, why invite, and then this day why give. Our hope in the midst of this series is that you feel invited by the questions. It's been a hallmark of this place that we call Idlewild for a really long time. But not just invited, beloved, challenged as well. Challenged to re-engage in worship whether here physically or virtually, challenged to pick up scripture or a book of theology to join one of our formation classes and indeed use your mind to seek out your faith in Jesus Christ, challenged to imagine what an invitation to prayer might look like, maybe with our intercessory prayer ministry or maybe in your personal prayer life, challenged to find that little

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bit of extra time that you might have or you don't think you have in your schedule to serve God in and through this place. Challenged to greet someone this week with the trust and the hope and the belief that God actually intends for them to be part of a beloved community, that if you invite them here because this is a place of value to you that they might find value here too, a group of people willing to walk with them, serve alongside them, pray for them, and love them, and finally this day to reflect on how God is calling you to generosity. All the treasures that have been entrusted to your care.

My hope and my prayer for Idlewild Presbyterian Church is that when we look back some years from now, we might be able to say that our hearts are more gracious and more generous and more loving. We might be able to say that our hearts have been found amongst the poor and the needy, the abused and the forgotten, that our hearts might be found amongst our neighbors here in Midtown Memphis. And we might be able to say that we have loved those people with our whole hearts because we have placed our treasure in those places, so that God might be known and glorified and that love might abound from each of us.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.