

Where Is Your Treasure?

The writings of Luke—the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts—have more to say about our relationship to money and the things that money can buy, than any of the writings in the New Testament, and maybe even in the entire Bible. From Mary's song—the Magnificat—at the beginning of Luke to Paul's farewell address to the elders at Ephesus in Acts chapter 21, Luke comes back to this theme over and over again. Luke saw wealth—for lack of a better word—as a powerful spiritual force in our lives. And he collected together Jesus' teaching on the subject—in word and deed—and the teaching and example of the first Christians and wove them into his story.

It is not stretching things too far to say that wealth is a spiritual force in its own right. On the negative side, wealth can steal away the affection and loyalty that we owe only to God—it can be a destructive idol, the motivation and means for all sorts of evil. Remember Jesus' saying that a person can't serve both God and Mammon (Luke 16:13). But on the positive side, Luke also shows that money can be a powerful tool for doing good in the world—for advancing the mission of Jesus and embodying the values of the kingdom of God.

God created us as physical, embodied, material beings—who need food, and clothing, and shelter. And God has given not just the need for food, but also the capacity to enjoy food and drink. He has given not just the need to

cover ourselves but the creative capacity to adorn ourselves. He has not left us to huddle away in caves, but has given us the skill and vision to build everything from simple shelters to magnificent palaces. In short, God intends for us to live securely in this world and not just securely but abundantly.

But in a world that is distorted by sin, our basic human need for security and our capacity to enjoy God's creation get distorted in ways that lead us away from God. And the readings last week and this week from Luke 12 put us squarely in the middle of a deep spiritual tension in our relationship with material things.

Last week, Jesus spoke to the problem of greed. There is something about us as human beings when we encounter a good thing that drives us to desire more and more of it. And as we acquire more material wealth, we have a way of using our possessions and our bank accounts as a means to overcome the uncertainties of life—we try to make ourselves the guarantors of our own security. In the extreme we are in danger of becoming like the rich fool in the parable we read last week, who discovered the hard way that “life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” The spiritual danger of having an abundance of material things is that we will live as if there is no God.

But it turns out that the rich aren't the only ones preoccupied with material things. As soon as Jesus finishes saying these things about greed he turns to the other side of the tension – our anxiety about not having enough. As people, who for the most part, have access to the basic material things we

need, I'm not sure how often or intensely we may feel this anxiety. So I'd like to take us on a little side trip that might help us appreciate it.

As I've been mulling over this Scripture my mind has been drawn to a term that's come into use recently– food insecurity. Food insecurity is broader than hunger. The United States Department of Agriculture defines it as “a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.” It doesn't necessarily mean having no food in one's home; it's a matter of having access to enough of the right kinds of food. A big part of that is being able to afford it, but it can also have to do with matters of access.

So, for instance, in Lee County, IL, 11 percent of the population, or about 3700 people are food insecure, almost half of the children in the Dixon Public Schools qualify for free school lunches, and the southwest quadrant of the City of Dixon actually qualifies as a food desert, due to its lack of a full-service grocery store.

A complicating factor in food insecurity is its relationship to another major health issue, obesity. At first glance that might seem like a contradiction, but the two are linked in a number of ways. Lack of access to healthy food can lead to eating too much unhealthy food. Carbohydrates provide a lot of cheap calories, and when money is tight many people resort to diets heavy in them just to fill up. The economic limitations that contribute to food insecurity can also be connected to a lack of opportunities for physical activity and access to good medical care.

But people can also overeat just because they're anxious about food. When people who are forced to skip meals get a chance to eat, they tend to overeat to compensate. Stress produces also biological changes that make the body store excess fat.

This picture shows that food insecurity is multi-layered problem. An adequate response has to include relief efforts like school lunch programs and food pantries. It also has to include economic development efforts that can provide sustainable incomes for families. And it has to address systemic issues like the distribution of opportunities and wealth.

I've belabored this point in part because I've never been seriously hungry in my entire life. So as I read Jesus, words I'm led to wonder how much comfort a person who is truly anxious about their next meal would react to these words. Certainly being continually anxious helps no one, but these are empty promises if nothing happens in ordinary, earthly, worldly ways to answer prayers for daily bread.

At the same time, when I've hit points of anxiety about my economic well-being, I've been able to find genuine comfort and encouragement in Jesus' words, as I remember all the ways God has provided. And so because I am able to trust that God is able to provide for me, I think Jesus' message is intended to caution me against trying to make my own security.

It's here to warn me away from clinging to what I have, of anxiously hardening my heart against people who are actually hungry and insecure, of

buying into a rhetoric of destructive myths and half-truths that seek to set me against them. It's here—alongside the parable of the rich fool—to warn me off from grasping after more than I really need. It's not about depriving myself or feeling guilty about enjoying material blessings, but it is a warning about feeling some sort of entitlement to them, or going into debt to have them, or letting them become substitutes for life's true riches.

I've really struggled through these two sermons this week and last week to try to find adequate words. But probably the most important words in this whole long section of chapter 12 are the last ones, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Our relationship with wealth is complicated. As I said earlier, money can be a powerful tool for doing good in the world, for advancing the message of Jesus and embodying the values of the kingdom of God. Or it can be a destructive idol, a motivation and means for all sorts of evil.

The difference is all in the orientation of our hearts, and the thing that directs our hearts comes down to how we define the word "treasure." When Jesus speaks of "unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys," he isn't speaking of getting a solid-gold Cadillac someday. He's talking about treasuring the things that God treasures—of treasuring a world filled with people who are healthy and whole, who live in harmony with each other and all his creation, who do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with their God. If we truly treasure such things—then our hearts will be directed

toward these things—and we will know that life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

Throughout the ages faithful believers have searched the Scriptures for some program to make all this so. In particular they have tried to find it in the writings of Luke because his writings seem to have so much to say on the subject. They have tried to emulate the community Luke describes in the opening chapters of Acts or the lifestyle of Paul.

But my conclusion after years of living with these writings is that through them God is really calling us to reorient our hearts. Jesus doesn't give us a set of rules—he speaks prophetically to shake us out of complacency. He says things like, if you want to find life, “Sell your possessions, and give alms” or in chapter 14, “None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” (Luke 14:33 NRSV) He tells parables about a rich fool or a dishonest manager to catch us by surprise. Luke tells stories of a rich respectable young man who clings to his possessions and misses the kingdom of God, and a repentant tax collector who gives his wealth away and finds it.

It's all about the heart. An author I've been reading on another topic, Craig Hill says that the hard part about following Jesus isn't doing what he commands; the hard part is believing the reality in which Jesus believed. The hard part is coming to the point of really truly completely and without reservation treasuring what Jesus treasures. If our hearts are oriented toward

those things, if we strive for those things, we will have the spiritual compass that allows us to make faithful choices about material things.

We can only get there by immersing ourselves in Jesus and his teaching—not by adding him on as a source of religious comfort for our middle-class lives. I believe that we only get there by prayer that is deep enough to allow us to surrender our greed and our anxiety to God. We can only get there by being in a community where we allow Scripture to speak to us prophetically, to challenge us and reorient us, to meet a God who provides for our deepest needs, a community that walks with and struggles with us and calls us to be honest with ourselves.

Our greed and our anxiety both begin with treasuring the wrong things. Lent is a season of repentance—in other words, it's a season for reorienting our hearts. May God so work in us that we might come to treasure what he treasures, for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Amen.

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