

Where is your treasure?

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, August 8, 2010: The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Luke 12:32-40.*

W elcome to August, that month when the city seems comparatively quiet and un-crowded. In my neighborhood a mile or so uptown, I've been able rather often lately to stroll against the light across the wide empty avenues, the closest oncoming traffic many blocks away. Even with much work to do, there is a relaxed feel about this last month of summer. This month is an especially good time to practice that ancient spiritual discipline: siesta.

Those of us tasked with the responsibility for preaching in August might expect, or wish for, similarly relaxed Gospel readings. Alas. Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that never wear out. Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit. Be like slaves ready when the master returns from his wedding. The Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. Not exactly the Gospel equivalent of beach reading.

How do we hear these words about masters and slaves when this country has worked so hard to abolish those words and the institution that gave them meaning? Do the words "treasure in heaven" prompt even a fleeting thought about whether we've given enough or done enough good deeds to make the cut, or to earn our way into heaven, whatever we think that means? Can we hear "the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour" without feeling at least vaguely uneasy, or picturing that roadside billboard that proclaims, "Get ready. Jesus is coming back, and he's going to be mad"?

Maybe these verses push a few buttons installed in us by past theologies or religions. Hear a contemporary interpretation (not translation) from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson:

What I'm trying to do here is get you to relax, not be so preoccupied

with getting so you can respond to God's giving . . . The Father wants to give you the very kingdom itself. Be generous. Give to the poor. Get yourself a bank that can't go bankrupt, [without sub-prime mortgages or derivatives], a bank in heaven far from bankrobbers, safe from embezzlers, a bank you can bank on. It's obvious, isn't it? The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being.

Notice the focus here on God's giving to us, God's own generosity. Religion sometimes seems to be about trying to get something from God—through saying the right words, behaving the right way, believing the right thing, however "right" has been defined.

But here and, I'd argue, through the very bedrock of our Christian faith, the focus is on what God has given us and continues to give us.

"It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." That has a nice ring, doesn't it? Ahh, the kingdom . . . spectacular success in my field, enough resources so that I can do what I want when I want, to be loved and admired, freedom from troubles, exotic travel, a parking space in Manhattan. What does the kingdom mean to you? "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done" we pray here every day. The kingdom, says writer and theologian Fred Buechner, "is not a place, but a condition. Whenever God's will is being done in various odd ways among us, even at this moment, the kingdom has come already . . . Jesus uses the poetry of parables to describe what the kingdom is like: like finding a million

dollars in a field, like finding a jewel worth a king's ransom, like finding something dear to you that you lost and thought you'd never see again—a valuable coin, a stray sheep, a lost child. When the kingdom comes, it's as if the thing you lost and thought you'd never find again is you." [Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, 1993, pg. 60] You were lost, and now you are found.

The kingdom, of course, is not just about me. It's not even just about us here, or us in the worldwide Church, or us in any particular group. God's kingdom has to do with all of us, and all of creation, and God, and how we all live together. The kingdom has to do with the quality of relationship among us. The kingdom has to do with God's action and presence among us; it also has to do with our own actions and presence with each other, with God, even with ourselves.

The kingdom is very real. I catch glimpses of the kingdom every now and then. Maybe you do, too. Every Sunday morning, I see glimpses of the kingdom each time our tiniest members practice their toddling and step-climbing right here in the middle of the service, each time they squawk during the sermon or the Creed, each time they shout AMEN at the end of the prayers. I see the kingdom whenever I see tears, for any reason: tears of joy in the eyes of a person who has found welcome and a home here, tears of grief at deep loss and honest anger at God. I see the kingdom in a courageous effort to live fully with a terminal illness. I see the kingdom in a valiant effort to find new life in a troubled relationship. Watch for glimpses of the kingdom.

"Sell your possessions, and give alms." The Greek word that we translate "alms" has the connotation of mercy, of compassion, of charity. Alms is not just throwing money; it refers to money, food, clothes, a service, anything given to the poor and needy out of compassion and mercy. If we feel compassion and mercy, that means we have a) actually recognized someone else is there, particularly someone who is poor and needy—the widows and orphans (and make no mistake: we are all widows and orphans at

some point), and b) we've realized that the other needs something. Compassion and mercy take us out of our own self-involvement, and lead us into action.

Jesus is not telling us to sell all our possessions and give everything away and therefore become a burden to others. Remember the rich farmer from last week's Gospel, whose crops produced abundantly, meaning more than he needed. Rather than build bigger barns to hold our abundance, we are called to share what we have with others who need it. Sharing whatever we have—money, time, talent, a cup of tea, a listening ear—is being generous.

God is generous. God wants to give us the kingdom. We are made in God's image. We are created to be generous, like God is generous. Our generosity is hard-wired in; it's in our soul's DNA. But things get in the way, things like fear and greed and self-centeredness. It seems we often have to re-learn how to be generous people, and to cultivate that quality of generosity in ourselves and in others, especially in our children. Our generosity is a response to God's generosity.

It's tempting to believe that we need to accumulate enough before we can share and be generous. (Whatever "enough" is. It's said that the definition of "enough" keeps changing: Enough is always just a little more than I have.) But the opposite is true. Whenever we share what we have, we become generous people. By sharing, we grow into the generous people God is creating us to be.

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Our hearts really do follow our treasure, not the other way around. Here's a spiritual exercise for August, and I do want you to try this at home:

Part A: Get out your records of what you have spent in the past year, say since last August. Get out your checkbook registers, print out your spreadsheets, get out your credit card statements. Assign some broad categories, e.g. housing, food, tuition, transportation, vacation, books, savings, contributions. Using those categories, make a list of everything you've given this past

year. Now put the categories in order by dollar amount, greatest to least. You are looking at your priorities.

If what you see in the numbers doesn't match the priorities you hold in your heart and soul, you've got some work to do. Where your treasure is, there your heart is also.

Part B: Keep a record for a week of how you give your time, e.g. to work, eating, sleeping, recreation, commuting, exercising, having a deep conversation with someone, praying, being in silence. At the end of the week, total up the hours you've given to each, and order the list by number of hours, greatest to least. You are looking at your priorities.

If you're able, even with rough estimates, look at a whole month or even a year. Where am I giving the treasure of my time and energy? Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Where is it we want our heart to be? Where does God want our heart to be? What might happen if we took a leap of faith and put our treasure there? What might happen if we shared more of what we have with others who need it, if we dared to live more generously? What might happen to our heart? What might that have to do with the kingdom?

Now I am biased, and I'll admit that bias up front. I would like it if you reorder your priorities to give more of your treasure to this place, our beloved St. Bart's, because I know from experience how that will grow your heart. But my bias aside, and even more important, I encourage you to find a way to share more of whatever you have with others who need it. That will be good for your heart.

It's August. A new school year will start in September. A new church program year will start in September. The city and the streets will fill back up, and the pace will pick up in September. This year *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year, falls on September 8, exactly one calendar month from today. Many of our Jewish brothers and sisters find this last month before the New Year an especially appropriate time for reflection and introspection, a time of re-setting of priorities and intentions, a time of renewal. I suggest we join them in that exercise this year.

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom . . . For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

It's August. Do you know where your treasure is? Do you know where your heart is?

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