

Orientation
Matthew 6: 19-21

Introduction to the reading

The verses we read this morning are at the mid-point of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the first of five great discourses in which he both reinterprets the old law and offers a new one. The Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer are part of the Sermon, as well as some familiar verses: "you are the salt of the earth... you are the light of the world"; "love your enemies"; "do not worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will bring worries of its own"; "do not judge so that you may not be judged".

Today's reading is given the heading "Orientation to God."

Matthew 6: 19-21

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Sermon

Good morning. I'm glad to be here this morning, among friends and neighbors, to help lead worship on this Consecration Sunday with a message about financial stewardship. This topic almost always takes some tricky navigation. In the end, you hope that the congregation will pledge enough to cover budgeted expenses and have something left for the unexpected. So, clearly that's a goal.

But the navigation is tricky because the Church is not a profit and loss business, though some of its operation is like a business. The Church is not a non-profit charity, with concerns about administrative expenses versus direct aid to the cause, although, through its missions and ministries, the Church does do that kind of work and service. The Church is not a social club, with dues and assessments, although it offers a place for like-minded and like-spirited individuals to gather for mutual support and fellowship.

The essence of Church is to be the body of Christ. The Church is the institutional representation of God in the world in the person of Jesus Christ, whose very name we bear. This is an incredibly high calling. We are members of the body of Christ, and we need to take our identity as Christians seriously and act accordingly.

And we need to engage in serious giving (of money and time and effort and attention) so that what gives meaning and purpose to life – what Jesus has called us to be and to do – will continue to make a difference in this world and in individual lives.

Now, people give to the church for a variety of reasons – habit, duty, guilt, fear, advantage, influence, social pressure. But the best reasons involve not the treasures that the world has to offer, but the treasures that, as Jesus says, are of heaven:

- thanksgiving and gratitude;
- doing the good which Jesus has commanded;
- spiritual well-being: strengthening spiritual relationships, nurturing spiritual growth, giving deeper meaning to life, submitting to a higher calling
- offering and receiving joy.

I think another one of the best reasons to give to the Church is to be a part of a Christian faith community, to be a part of all that Jesus Christ signifies:

- hospitality and welcome over barriers and divisiveness
- reconciliation and forgiveness over pride, power and selfishness
- peace over dissension and violence
- hope over despair
- joy over meanness
- generosity over stinginess
- love over hate

Perhaps some of you saw the op-ed piece in *The Star-Ledger* a couple of weeks ago: “I still go to Mass despite problems of the Catholic Church” by a woman named Mary Wisniewski. She wrote:

I have many problems with the Catholic Church. Many of its leaders failed miserably at protecting children. The institutional church is backward in its views about women and gays. ... [But] for all the sins committed by the institution, the practice of Catholicism can offer a path

to the transcendent, to what is beyond ourselves. It's a tough journey, the search for God, and it helps not to be alone. ... the church gives me something I need. Every week it invites me into a conversation about the power of love and the search for peace and the necessity of going beyond our individual needs and looking at the needs of others. ... [All faiths offer this.]

Today you are being asked to give thought to all these things.

What do you treasure in this life? Many would say family. Others might say making a contribution toward what they consider to be the good. Perhaps it is security, peace, harmonious relationships. Or using one's talents and skills to be successful.

Jesus says that whatever you treasure in life is what you will put your heart into doing and supporting. I hopefully suggest that, when you think about it as a Christian, what you probably really do treasure the most aligns with what the Church is at its heart.

Shortly you will be asked to write down your pledge of financial commitment to this particular church congregation for the coming year. Orient yourself toward God and listen to your heart: What is God calling you to do in the name of Jesus Christ?

Rev. Kathryn Henry
at Lamington Presbyterian Church
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