

3<sup>rd</sup> Lent, Jason Byassee  
Boone UMC; March 23, 2014

**Treasure: Heart;** conf retreat, intro songs at 8:45

Let me start with a story about scripture. We only get a tiny scrap of scripture today, a little Lent-sized morsel, but it's enough to fill the soul forever.

During the Holocaust, a young scholar named David Weiss Halivni was in one of the camps, and he noticed a Nazi soldier eating a sandwich wrapped in something. He looked closer and saw that the wrapping paper was actually a page torn from a priceless collection of the rabbis' works, commenting on the bible. He dropped to his knees and begged the soldier to give him the paper, a bit of trash to one, a priceless treasure to another. Now, the Jews in the camp had a page of the bible. They took it out every week to worship. They read it over and over—it was on the question of whether a Jew must rid his house of yeast himself before Passover or whether someone else could be hired to do it for him. The topic didn't matter. They treasured it, reading it, kissing it, trying to read through the sandwich grease. They gave it to the holiest Jew in the group, one who prayed with his lips moving all the time, who slept with it, kept it safe for the rest of them. One scrap of the bible. The heart of a community.

Here's a scrap of the bible. Will we treat it as the treasure it is? Come, let us stand in the presence of our king.

Matthew 6:19-21

*6:19 Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth or rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

That's the word of God, it belongs to you, the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

Today is the second in a series of sermons on treasure that will run through Lent until Easter. Our topic today is the heart. The heart. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also," Jesus says.<sup>1</sup> This is part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' manifesto about how life should be in his kingdom. This is the part of the bible that makes careful readers most nervous. Love your enemy. Pray for those who hate you. Give your possessions away. Blessed are those who mourn. Can't get divorced. Can't even look at someone of the opposite sex the wrong way. And, just to top it all off, don't worry about a thing. Ok Jesus, you've given us a lot to worry about in this sermon, and then you tell us not to. That's why we treasure Jesus in our hearts. Not because we understand him or his bible. But because we don't. We just want to be with him. And the more we're with him the more like him we become.

The Sermon on the Mount is sometimes dismissed. Politely, of course. Some say Jesus makes the demands so great here, so impossible, that we'll know we can only be saved by grace. That's

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<sup>1</sup> [http://mattstone.blogspot.com/photos/sacred\\_images/sermon-on-the-mount-1.jpg](http://mattstone.blogspot.com/photos/sacred_images/sermon-on-the-mount-1.jpg)

interesting, but it's not what Jesus says. John Wesley says Jesus makes clear he thinks we can do these things—so do them. Preachers sometimes try to dodge, weave, evade, insist Jesus doesn't mean it. A friend calls this protecting people from Jesus. But Jesus gets past our defenses and mugs us just the same. Others point out there's a kind of economic system here. Share what you have. Give to those who don't. Don't plan for tomorrow. Have the kingdom break out right now. Sounds sort of communist doesn't it? But of course it isn't. No government is enforcing this, equally sharing misery all around. But neither does it sound capitalist. Karl Barth, the greatest theologian in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, almost never got invited to the US.<sup>2</sup> Here he is on his one trip with Dr. King. Why? Because he argued that both capitalism and communism are equally arrogant efforts to avoid the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is its own politics, its own economics, and it is an offense to the world. Paul Minear put it this way.<sup>3</sup> In the Sermon on the Mount,

Jesus assaulted the whole human race at the point where that race is most sensitive: its desire for security and superiority.

To read, or live, the Sermon on the Mount is to be mugged, assaulted, by a God whose ways are not our ways.

Let's start with the heart. Methodists have long been known as people of the heart. John Wesley's problem with the church of England wasn't that they believed the wrong stuff. They didn't. What the Church of England believed was completely true. His problem was that nobody's heart was on fire.<sup>4</sup> His words

Religion does not consist in orthodoxy or right opinions. A man may be orthodox in every point; he may not only espouse right opinions but zealously defend them against all opposers; he may think justly concerning the incarnation of our Lord, concerning the ever blessed Trinity, and every other doctrine contained in the oracles of God. He may assent to all the creeds, yet tis possible that he may have no religion at all, no more than a Turk or a pagan. He may be almost as orthodox as the devil . . . and all the while be as great a stranger as he to the religion of the heart.

You know what it means to have your heart on fire. It's how you felt when you first saw the person you loved. It's how you felt when your child was born. The heart is who you are. Ancient Jews in the bible spoke of God working in our guts. Our intestines. We moderns live in our heads, our brains attached to the computers like the Matrix. Jesus aimed right for the heart. A heart surgeon once told a preacher friend of mine what an awesome responsibility it is to hold a man's heart in your hand. My friend said, no joke, I do that every Sunday.

A writer I admire named Brian Doyle wrote a book on the heart called *The Wet Engine*. He wrote about literal hearts, the organ that keeps everything alive.<sup>5</sup> Like the heart of a hummingbird.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://sites.google.com/site/beeldfiguren/karl-barth/achtergronden/barth%20-%20martin%20luther%20king\\_01.jpg](https://sites.google.com/site/beeldfiguren/karl-barth/achtergronden/barth%20-%20martin%20luther%20king_01.jpg)

<sup>3</sup> Quote on screen plz

<sup>4</sup> On screen (feel free to use two slides so it's more easy to read)

<sup>5</sup> <http://amsdaily.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/hummingbird.jpg>

It beats 10 times per second. And it's the size of a pencil eraser or a child's fingernail. Hummingbirds can dive at sixty miles per hour and fly backwards. They can fly 500 miles without a rest. And when they rest, their heart slows to 1/15<sup>th</sup> its normal rate. Because their little hearts run so hot they burn out, suffering more heart attacks and ruptures and aneurysms than any other creature. Doyle's words, "Every creature on earth has approximately two billion heartbeats to spend in a lifetime. You can spend them slowly, like a tortoise and live to be two hundred years old, or you can spend them fast, like a hummingbird, and live to be two years old." And to dazzle our hearts all the while.

Now two examples from the animal kingdom is too many, sorry, one would do, but I can't resist, Doyle is so good on this.<sup>6</sup> The biggest heart in the world belongs to the blue whale. It weighs more than seven tons. It is as big as a house with four rooms—a child could walk between the four chambers, head high, only bending to step through the valves. When its born it drinks hundreds of gallons of milk a day and gains two hundred pounds a day. Then we lose track of it, we don't know its mating habits or social life or diseases or much else. We do know the blue whales travel in pairs, their songs full of longing can be heard underwater for hundreds of miles.

The heart is always about more than the heart. Sure it keeps us alive, as if that's not enough. But the heart is who we are, who we love, what we do with ourselves. And that's what Jesus is after. Our squishy alive fickle hearts. He wants all of us, every last bit.

And that's why Jesus is always talking about money. Now be careful here, you can get in trouble. One of the worst defeats I ever suffer as a pastor is when someone leaves our church. Makes me sick for months. I pray for those folks, try and be kind when I see them, but by then it's usually too late. I heard of one case recently where a young woman left because she thought we were always talking about money. I feel sick. But then I realize, wait, that's not my fault. It's Jesus'. Because he's always talking about money. Why? He doesn't need the money. He owns everything there has ever been (though he seems to have gone without a lot of money while he was among us). He's always talking about our money because he's after our hearts, and if he reaches for our hearts he's liable to be reaching very close to our wallets. Especially in a culture like ours that measures worth with money.<sup>7</sup> Louie Giglio puts this biblical point perfectly. He asks, how do you know what you worship?

It's easy. You simply follow the trail of your time, your affections, your energy, your money, and your allegiance. At the end of that trail you'll find a throne; and whatever, or whomever, is on that throne is what's of highest value to you. On that throne is what you worship.

Money is only one of the many things we're tempted to worship. Some others might worship a studied disinterest in money. I met a girl once in Chicago who played music and lived with a traveling band called the psalters.<sup>8</sup> They call their music anarcho-punk worship, they sing ancient Christians songs with screams and hollers and drive the country in a converted schoolbus. As soon as I heard her talk I knew she came from North Carolina and from money. So I asked where she was

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<sup>6</sup> <http://files.abovetopsecret.com/files/img/as5283feed.jpg>

<sup>7</sup> Quote on screen plz

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.carinaromano.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/psalters2.jpg>

from. Sure enough, she said, “Myers Park.” Then she added with gusto, “it’s real fancy there.” She’s proud of her aggressive rejection of money. That’s what’s on her throne.

What do you treasure?

Here’s one thing many of us treasure. Moasting. It’s a combination of moaning and boasting. I have *so much to do*. How are you? *Busy*. You? *Busy too*. I can’t believe how much work there is, how busy the kids have me, how in demand I am at work. Moasting, get it? Look what we’re doing. We’re trying to one up one another. Show how important we are. But we’re also complaining. We don’t actually want to run at a high RPM all the time. Lent is a time for letting go of moasting. For doing less. When someone asks we can say, “I’m doing nothing” and mean it. When I was sick recently I’d lay down someplace too weak to get up. So I’d just lie there and do nothing. And do you know what? I didn’t earn anything. Didn’t get anything done. Nothing productive. All I was in those moments was a tired child of God. Baptized. And that’s enough.

When I think of treasure I think of secret things in secure places.<sup>9</sup> This is why the *Indiana Jones* movies are so great, they’re treasure hunts. When I was a kid my dad made a big deal of taking me to the bank. Huge scary door to the safety deposit box. Multiple keys turning. And then treasure. My great-grandpa’s gold pocketwatch. A Mickey Mantle rookie card. A bunch of South African gold kruggerands (which I think were illegal at the time). Treasure! Keep it under lock and key. But I also remember my mom’s engagement ring that had belonged to her grandmother. Sold, for money for God knows what, gone now. Treasure in this world does not last. It’s ok to treasure things. But not to worship them. Jim Elliot, the missionary in South America who lost his life, famously said, “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” We can’t keep even our own lives. Best to give them up to save them. Let alone a baseball card, a coin you never see, a ring however valuable.

Sometimes we treasure national narratives. When I was on a mission trip in Russia I got to know the leader of an organization that existed before the Soviet Union fell, so of course she had to have been a Communist Party member. I asked her quietly once how she really felt when the USSR fell. She looked around, and then bore down on me and said “I felt crushed. I had great hopes for our country.” How would we feel if there were no more US? The same. And that’s why Russia is gobbling up a bite it chewed off a neighbor—it hasn’t given up its dreams of ruling. As Christians our identity comes from Jesus and not from our citizenship or dreams of national conquest. It’s not near as painful, but maybe in America we are slowly learning we can’t police the world.

What we treasure can be obvious. The standard things the church rails on are ostentatious display—house, car, clothes, whatever. But I tend to think treasure is more slippery than that. I think I’m proud of my degrees. I don’t talk about them, don’t ask you to call me Dr., I don’t even wear clothes from schools from which I hold degrees. Too tawdry. But take them away and I’d go to pieces. A throne. A treasure. My heart. Our hymn today, “You Are My Vision,” calls *God* “my heart,” “heart of my own heart.” It asks that where we now sit other things we make space for God alone.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/indiana-jones-raiders-of-the-lost-ark-580.png>

You can see what we treasure best perhaps when we lose it. You often see this in life transitions—I'm grateful to Bobby Sharp for this point, he's studying this question of life transitions in his Sunday School class. Often those who have had a position that matters in the world find their whole life called into question when they lose it. No longer president, no longer banker, no longer first in class. And they don't know who they are anymore. So they keep hanging around the office. Keep talking about the good ole days back in high school when they were popular and cool and mattered. Keep pining for something that is no more. They can't let go. Maybe you've been there, I know I have. A smaller version, when you're on vacation and the only chore is to take a nap and read a book and not get sunburned. Then about Thursday you realize, I have to go home. And you mourn that loss, even after just a few days! What we have to learn to do is to let go. To no longer have that position, be on that vacation, be that kind of person. Lent is a time of letting go. In Lent we say nothing matters more than that I am baptized. Claimed by Christ forever. Whatever I achieve or fail at, whatever happens or doesn't, nothing can dry the waters of my baptism. My treasure is in heaven.

A friend told me once about a church superior he had. Good and wise man with ambition. He wanted to be a bishop. And he was passed over. And he quit church. Wouldn't turn up. Quit being a disciple. And the question then is, what was his treasure? Jesus? Or being a big deal in the church?

Now let me say something about this heaven bit.<sup>10</sup> "Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth or rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal." We tend to think of heaven as someplace else. A place you go when you die. A place where your soul is with Jesus. And that makes sense when we die. But this is Jesus talking. He *is* heaven itself. And in him heaven and earth meet, they overlap and interlock, they're made one. When we think of heaven we shouldn't think of what Huckleberry Finn thought, of a place with clouds and angels and harps, who'd wanna go there? We should think of Jesus whose presence is heaven. So on that definition heaven is wherever Jesus is right now. And here's why—Jesus is the ultimate treasure! He's the one who displaces all other treasures. He's the one whom moth can't eat, rust can't destroy, thief can't break in and steal.

Let me illustrate this negatively if I can. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* there is a terrible old woman whom nobody likes. She goes out of her way to be cruel and then finally dies. St. Peter can only find one good deed she ever did for anybody—she gave an onion to a beggar. That's it. So her guardian angel goes with the onion to help the lady out of the fires of hell. The angel lowers the onion to her, the same onion, and she grabs it and the angel starts to lift her out. And others grab hold of her, she starts to kick them away, back, this is my onion! And it breaks, and she falls. Scary. Don't worry, it's only a story. But it makes a point. The only kind of treasure that lasts is kindness done to others for the glory of God. Every time you regard someone else as a human being that's another onion. Every time you love someone you don't like or the world despises, an onion. Every time you pray for someone you don't know, onion. Pretty soon your angel has something to work with.

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<sup>10</sup> Mt. 6:20 on screen plz.

But this isn't just about us and our souls. This story as always is about the church. Where is our treasure, and where is our heart? We had a man come in the church office just this week with an interesting and important ministry he wants us to support. Good for him, we heard him out. Then he all but demanded we give to it a \$100,000 donation. What? We don't give anything that much money, we just met you, who do you think you are? It's the way folks think, that a church like this has like shrink wrapped bricks of cash we don't know what to do with. But our budget is committed, to things we treasure. Or if we don't treasure them friends and leaders let's change them. In the ancient church, a Roman soldier came to the church at Rome and demanded its treasure. Then as now the church talks about money so much the assumption is we have it and don't know how to get rid of it. So the deacon of the church, Lawrence, asked for three days. Three days later the soldier came back<sup>11</sup> and the church was full of the poor, the blind, the lame, the deaf of Rome, every needy person Lawrence could find. Here is the treasure of the church, he said.<sup>12</sup> For his trouble the Romans roasted him on a grill. We remember him as St. Lawrence. Because he was right. Those whom Jesus treasures, especially the poor, are the treasure of the church.

What makes our heart beat faster as a church? What makes us lean in and say, yes, we want more of that. Not membership. Not money. Preachers care about those things. But I mean this way. Marriages repaired. Relationships restored. Enemies turned into friends. The poor fed and housed. Good news told to everybody, told so beautifully folks want to change their lives, switch their heart allegiance. Communities thriving and flourishing with everyone granted dignity and kindness. A glimpse of the kingdom of God, that's what makes my heart beat faster church. Like a hummingbird's. How about yours?

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.lib-art.com/imgpainting/6/5/18956-st-lawrence-distributing-almms-fra-angelico.jpg>

<sup>12</sup> [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ef/12th-century\\_painters\\_-\\_The\\_Martyrdom\\_of\\_St\\_Lawrence\\_-\\_WGA15841.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ef/12th-century_painters_-_The_Martyrdom_of_St_Lawrence_-_WGA15841.jpg)

<sup>13</sup> On screen plz