

**Rev. Dr. Bill Smutz**  
**“Accumulated Treasure”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, May 9, 2021**

***Ecclesiastes 5:10-17***

*The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity. When goods increase, those who eat them increase; and what gain has their owner but to see them with his eyes? Sweet is the sleep of labourers, whether they eat little or much; but the surfeit of the rich will not let them sleep. There is a grievous ill that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owners to their hurt, and those riches were lost in a bad venture; though they are parents of children, they have nothing in their hands. As they came from their mother's womb, so they shall go again, naked as they came; they shall take nothing for their toil, which they may carry away with their hands. This also is a grievous ill: just as they came, so shall they go; and what gain do they have from toiling for the wind? Besides, all their days they eat in darkness, in much vexation and sickness and resentment.*

***Matthew 6:19-29***

*‘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.*

*‘The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!*

*‘No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.*

*‘Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.*

I remember how excited my wife, Gina, and I were as we set up our first apartment as newlyweds. Outside of a few odds and ends we had salvaged from the cellars and attics of our extended families and a couple of important pieces of furniture, like a kitchen table and a bed which we received as wedding presents, and some additional gifts, like a whole bunch of fine China and more toasters than we could ever use at one time. Outside of this odd collection of stuff, our little one-bedroom, second-story apartment was pretty bare. And so, each time we were able to save up a bit of money, we were almost giddy to then go and purchase a lamp or a couch or even a couple of knives that were sharp enough to be useful in the kitchen. As the years went by, we continued to amass treasures a bit at a time.

And then a first house and a first child came within months of each other. We had no idea how many more possessions a new child required, but luckily, the house gave us room for all that new stuff. And then in fairly short succession, there were two more kids and moves to new churches for me, which allowed for the purchase of a larger house, which was helpful because the stuff just kept coming. The stuff just kept accumulating until one day

some 16 or 17 years into marriage, we sat and stared at each other with a glazed and overwhelmed look and wondered together how we had gotten from that largely empty apartment to the clutter of our present day. And we pondered what we were going to do to let go of some of our accumulated treasures and lighten our load.

Today, we continue our post-Easter exploration of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. Understanding this sermon, which is found in the fifth, sixth and seventh chapters of the Gospel of Matthew, to be where Jesus lays out his core values for the beloved community, the heavenly community God wants him to create on Earth. And also understanding this sermon as the place where Jesus gives his disciples, you and me, the guiding principles that we are to use together in following him to change, to transform the world. Our lesson in chapter six of Matthew echoes the wise words of our Ecclesiastes text, which Karen read for us earlier.

Our lesson follows close on Jesus's instruction concerning prayer in his mountaintop sermon. This prayer, which Jesus teaches his disciples, is known to us as the Lord's Prayer, which we use a lot. Jesus uses this prayer as a starting point for the life of discipleship. Pray this way, he says, which will help you begin to live as you pray, which will make the rest of being a disciple more understandable. Then, there's the kicker, though not necessarily any easier. Jesus' teaching in this prayer helps us to know what we should do and where we should journey in life and faith by following the path we are sent upon in this prayer and making the choices in behavior and attitude that this path requires. Well, that's something altogether different. That's something a lot harder. It should not be surprising that one of the main behaviors and attitudes, which Jesus lifts up in connection to the prayer he teaches, is that human treasure and stuff. The stuff that fills our lives and our houses and our storage units to overflowing. It's unsurprising that Jesus is interested in our not being controlled by our stuff and that it is harder and more difficult to achieve the expectations which Jesus places upon us when our lives are cluttered with stuff. Jesus knew that not being controlled by treasured stuff was hard for disciples 2000 years ago. Imagine how shocked and maybe appalled is the better word, Jesus feels when he looks at us and our accumulated stuff today.

The core of Jesus' teaching on this subject is that we have the ability to control our stuff. Let me say that again because I think it's really important. Jesus tells us that we have the ability to control our stuff and that we must control the impact which our stuff has on us. This control underlies, for Jesus, the contrast between earthly wealth and heavenly treasure. Jesus proclaims that earthly wealth--our stuff--cannot save us. Instead, he warns us the accumulation of stuff draws us in, draws us into the belief and practice and trap that there can never be enough, that we must always be accumulating more, and that this kind of scarcity thinking-- has not provided enough resources for all people to live. And so, we must acquire and accumulate as many resources as possible in order to ensure our own survival and the survival of those we love. Jesus knows that this scarcity thinking, while it is instinctual for us at some level, is also thinking that easily and quickly becomes deadly to us, deadly to us as individuals and particularly deadly to the larger human community in which we exist, for Jesus understands how easily we can become enslaved to stuff. And because of this understanding, Jesus insists that no one, no one of us can serve two masters. We cannot serve earthly wealth and heavenly treasure, and this reality is one of the great ironies of life. We need some amount of stuff in our lives in order to physically survive. But ultimately, we cannot rely on and we cannot trust stuff in order to truly live. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus refocuses the question of human accumulation from Earth to Heaven. The more stuff we accumulate, the further from perfection we become, He says. The commentator I'm following for thoughts and ideas on this text is the New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine. And she says Jesus is not saying here that the rich, by definition, are damned since for the God we worship, all things are possible. This is important. It's an important idea for us to hear, I think, since we are disciples who for the most part have accumulated a fair amount of earthly wealth.

Levine believes that Jesus is offering we, disciples, an important warning here, that Jesus is clearly stating for us that earthly treasure distracts us from heavenly priorities and that the more stuff we have, the more distracted we are and we become, from the actions which create and build up the beloved community, the heavenly community, the community of Heaven on Earth, which God expects us to be all about as disciples of Jesus. Because we are disciples who, for the most part, enjoy large amounts of earthly wealth and stuff more than many others, it is all too tempting and all too easy to want to just skip over this part of the Sermon on the Mount, to pretend that it doesn't

exist or that the lectionary just didn't touch that particular reading. It's tempting to skip over it, focusing instead on a part of Jesus's teaching that is more comfortable to us, that feels easier to hear and easier to follow. The desire for avoidance is simply part of our humanness, part of who we are.

Jesus, however, is not worried about our comfort. Jesus's only concern is our faithfulness. And so as one who loves us, Jesus continually holds the hard expectations of discipleship before us and invites and encourages, and I think really expects us to choose faithfulness, to choose faithfulness again and again and again, to choose faithfulness even when we have blown it and chosen something else, to choose faithfulness because that's what discipleship is all about. And so perhaps the best, the most faithful spiritual homework that we can take on this week as we journey through life is to examine our lives as individual disciples as well as to examine our shared life here in this place as a community of disciples. And through this self-examination, take the time to think about where earthly stuff, earthly wealth is cluttering our lives, where it is so cluttering our lives that it is keeping us from focusing on heavenly treasure, and is keeping us from living lives that lift up and offer heavenly treasure to others and thinking about equity and sharing and having less for ourselves so that others can have some at all, or so that others can have enough to simply survive.

This kind of thinking is never pleasurable, it is never easy and offers only potential solutions, I think, that are difficult and complex for us. But this kind of thinking is what disciples do. This kind of thinking is what *we* as disciples do. It is what we do because Jesus expects us to always be striving towards faithfulness, and because Jesus knows that any new and different action or direction in life on our part, that new and different directions that builds up the community of faith, the beloved community, that heavenly community that our new and different directions first have to be imagined by us before they can become our new way of thinking, our new way of believing, our new way of acting, our new approach to faithfulness. I think this is enough spiritual homework for one week. And so, I pray that God may grant us all the grace and the wisdom and the compassion to attend to such holy work, to attend to this work in utter faithfulness. Amen.