

Luke 12:13-34

Treasure in Heaven

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The Congregational Church of Needham

This month our worship theme is Stewardship. Now Jesus tells a lot of stories about stewards – people in charge of large estates in Galilee. In these stories Jesus starts with the premise that the Master of a large house has to take a trip and so he leaves all of his possessions in the hands of his steward. While most of us do not think of ourselves as the stewards of a large estate, or even the stewards of somewhat modest homes in comparison, Jesus' point is that we have all been put in charge of a great deal simply by being alive. And the Master becomes a transparent symbol for God who has left us in charge for a while. Jesus reminds us that God expects us to manage the gifts we have been given in life - our homes, our families, our communities, and even be the stewards of faith. God has left us in charge of the earth, and all the people we influence and make an impact on. When you think about it this way the notion of stewardship can seem pretty overwhelming. Most of us breathe a sigh of relief at the end of the day if we can get to work, get a little exercise and manage to shepherd our flock without a trip to the emergency room. If we are honest, this notion that we are stewards of our faith seems like a tall order. There are a lot of forces out there so much bigger than us. There are the markets, the relatives, the advertisers, the societal expectations.

Today I want to talk about our values, and how our choices define our priorities. You might imagine that the Bible stories tell the narrative of a group of people who had it all together and found faith easily. But you would be wrong because they tell the saga of a group of slaves who managed to escape and settled in a new land after decades of wandering. These stories reflect the lives of some of the poorest people on the earth at the time, folks who wielded very little political or economic power. But they fashioned a faith that called them to distinguish themselves from the pagans around them.

They ate certain food that forced them to stay loyal to each other. They said prayers at various times in the day so that they would never forget God. They put signs on their doorways to distinguish themselves from others and remember God whenever they departed or entered their homes. All of these customs set them apart, and forced them to rely on one another; so their stories about living among the pagans of their day can help us learn to live among the pagans we know in our community.

Today's story is about a Rich Fool who is greedy. He had good barns that were sufficient but he was not contented until he got more. Then he tore down his barns and built new ones- bigger ones. He stockpiled all of this grain without thinking of others or all the good it might do. Congratulating himself, he hoarded it. But God condemned him. Jesus says we need to sort through life's options and make good decisions. Let's take a look at this story and see what Jesus is telling us for our lives today.

In the first place Jesus says don't put your faith in material things. In some ways Jesus' teachings sound like a pious platitude, so I searched for modern examples of the effects of materialism today. My search brought me to a book entitled *What Money Can't Buy* by Harvard government professor Michael Sandel to see what contemporary experts say on the subjects. Now, we know that money can solve a lot of problems, and shelter us from life's harder bumps, but can it make you happy? Are there limits to our purchasing power?

Did you know that you can buy a wedding toast? If you have to propose a toast at a wedding you can go onto the site [The Perfect Toast.com](http://ThePerfectToast.com) and find what you need for \$19.95. They have been in business since 1997. I don't know about you but I go to a lot of weddings as a minister and the best toasts are not the canned ones. They are the ones that ring true, the toasts where people say something from their heart.

Did you know that in China you can buy an apology? According to *The New York Times* in 2001 if you have to apologize to an estranged lover or business partner and cannot bring yourself to do it in person you can hire Tianjin Apology; their motto is “We say sorry for you”. It is hard to imagine how a second hand apology could really feel like anything other than an intrusion on a personal matter.

Did you know that you can buy friends, at least for your Facebook page? Most of us assume we cannot buy friendship, although some people try. Until recently you could bolster your popularity online by hiring good-looking friends for your Facebook page at a rate of 99 cents a friend but the phony friend site was shut down because it was populated by models who had not authorized the use of their pictures. You wonder how lonely it must be to have to buy friends for your Facebook page. *{All these examples come from What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets by Michael Sandel New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012 Chapter 3 “How Markets Crowd out Morals” p. 93ff.}*

If you are ambitious and project an image of success you may attract a posse of people who gain strength from your confidence or want to borrow your strength, somehow. But how many famous people complain that they never know who their real friends are because they feel manipulated by folks who are more enamored with their power than with them. How many rock stars complain that they cannot get good advice because no one will tell them the truth; they are surrounded by people who pander to them.

Jesus tells us to beware of putting our faith in money. Life is much more than material things- even more than food and clothing. Look at the ravens; they do not sow or reap. They have neither

storehouse nor barn, and yet God has a plan to feed them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!

In the second place money can corrupt.

Researchers have studied altruism to see if you can pay people to do the right thing. In the UK the blood banks are all supported by volunteers who donate their blood so people in operations or sudden accidents who need extra blood can have it. In the US some of the supply is made up by volunteers but a growing amount comes from people who are paid for their blood, typically poor people who sell their blood at a commercial blood bank to make money. A British sociologist has written a book comparing the system for collecting blood in the UK and here in the US. {IBID, p. 123} What they have discovered is that by turning the blood market into a commodity it undermines the sense in the general public that donating blood is a community responsibility. The commercialization of blood banks divides people by economic class, and makes people in need- both the poor and the sick- feel dis-connected instead of united in their human vulnerability. In this case the use of money for blood has eroded our sense of human community.

Whether we acknowledge it or not, it is that sense of belonging that we crave. This weekend we have enjoyed one of the great Church rituals which has endured since the Middle Ages – the Church Fair. People have come together to sell goods, to mingle and enjoy the community, and to support the Church. It raises money but that is not the most important aspect of it. As we roll up our sleeves and pitch in, and all sit down together over lobster rolls we connect with new friends and long-standing companions.

Jesus calls us to beware of what we prioritize.

Finally, Jesus says you have choices. You are the only one who can decide how you will build your life, or shape your days. No one else can do it but you. If you put your faith in yourself alone, you cannot help but be greedy and your life may be shallow.

Most of us know we have choices, but we tell ourselves that we don't. We give into the sense of being overwhelmed. King Solomon writes in Proverbs, "Like a city whose walls are broken down is a person who has lost self-control." When the walls are broken down the enemy can march right in. You are not protected. Every day we decide between contentment or discontent. Which tent do you want to live in? In a world where hoarding is an art form it is hard to forge a new path. The Israelites needed their faith to stay true to God's values and so do we.

We come together on Sunday morning to remember that there is another way to live. We need one another to support our best instincts, and keep our faith alive. Jesus told another story about two women. Martha was in the kitchen working hard to make the meal. I identify with Martha; most of us do. We have our lists and we check things off and those lists give our lives shape and purpose. But Mary chose differently. She sat to listen to Jesus. She accomplished nothing, but Jesus says she chose the better part. By implication, Jesus tells us to choose wisely each day, how we spend our time. Will we find the holy things in life and choose them, Jesus will rejoice with us.