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Proper 14, Year C, BCP
August 12, 2007

Heavenly Treasure and the Kingdom

Most of us, I think, have at least some fascination with the idea of buried or hidden treasure. Some people actually search for and even find sunken ships filled with gold and other valuables.. Others of us prefer less exciting options, like *Antiques Roadshow*, but the goal is essentially the same—the unexpected acquisition of treasure. Lottery games, casinos, and even some investments—offer us the opportunity for immediate and unanticipated wealth.

Yet Jesus warns us frequently about the perils of wealth, telling us in today’s Gospel to “Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven....”

This reading is powerful and often quoted, but its interpretation can be disturbing. Is Jesus telling us that we must sell all we own to build “treasure in heaven?” What is “treasure in heaven,” anyway? How do I get it? What does it look like? Why is it preferable to treasure on earth? These are reasonable questions, especially if a person takes Jesus’ directive literally—“Sell your possessions.” But in trying to answer them, we need to look closely at the text, the times, and what Jesus taught about the kingdom of God.

Jesus tells us in the first part of this reading, “It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” That the kingdom of God is near and available to us now is Jesus’ principle message throughout the Gospels. It also the hardest one to explain, so I’m going to start by saying that, at least in this context, “Kingdom of God” and “heaven” are virtually synonymous. Jesus could have said, “treasures in the kingdom,” and the meaning would be the same.

As humans, we experience our earthly existence bounded by space and time. We’re born, mature, get old, and die—a very sequential and straightforward process—one that we understand. We also know that we can only be one place at any given time—the physical world is our reality. God, however, isn’t limited by these considerations. We conceptualize heaven as a place “we go up to” after death, but it’s probably not like that at all, and almost certainly not to God. The time and space that define our mortal lives are not obstacles or limitations to God.

A Catholic theologian at Notre Dame, Richard McBrien, defines the kingdom as the saving presence of God, which can be found in everyday personal experiences. He writes, “Whenever people love one another, forgive one another, bear one another's burdens, work to build up a just and peaceful community—wherever people are of humble heart, open to their Creator and serving their neighbor—God's redemptive and liberating presence is being manifested.”

In other words, we don’t have to wait until death to experience the kingdom. When we live as God wants and as Christ teaches, we are near the kingdom. In a very real and immediate sense, the closeness to God that we call “heaven” is available to us now.

The word treasure is a little easier to define. A common misconception, however, is that we somehow earn our salvation—banking our good deeds like a saving or investment account. It is only through God’s grace that we are saved—we cannot earn our salvation. Besides, if there

were a bank in heaven where our sins and our kindnesses are recorded as withdrawals and deposits, most of us would be seriously overdrawn.

There is a section in Proverbs 2 where we learn that the wisdom, understanding, and insight that lead a person to God is treasure, and in 1 Timothy, chapter 6, we hear the writer exhorting his readers, “They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.”

Luke, in chapter six of his Gospel, tells us “the good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.”

From these brief readings, it sounds like treasure is about good works—and the wisdom, understanding, and insight that lead us to God. But if there isn’t a bank to store them, how do we accumulate them and what good are they?

When Jesus says, “Give alms,” he actually is saying more than just, “Write a check.” The Greek word, “evlehmosu,nh,” generally means “show charity or mercy,” or “be gracious,” or “show sympathy.” It suggests an awareness of the world around us, our interdependence and the need to care for each other—and the conviction to do something about it. A kind word, a sympathetic ear—any act of compassion would be included in the word translated as “alms.”

So are our voices and actions on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves or because of their status are not heard—physically and sexually abused children, persons with mental challenges, people displaced or alone because of economic or political reasons. Every one of us knows someone the system has missed, forgotten, or ignored. As Christians, we are commanded to help those who cannot help themselves.

Through our acts of kindness and compassion, by giving generously of ourselves—our hearts, our money, and our time—we open ourselves not just to those we help—we open ourselves to God. We build treasures in heaven through our openness to God, which we experience by loving and helping each other.

It is only through the openness that leads us to God that we can live our lives fully. That may sound like a radical statement—but we all know those moments in our lives when we let down our mental defenses and experienced an unconditional, unbounded sharing of emotion. Those are treasures in heaven. There usually are many—we protect ourselves too carefully, but life can be like that all the time. It would probably overwhelm us, but that’s what living in the kingdom is about—being overwhelmed by love.

There is a world of hidden treasure out there. We find it in the people we see every day. A random act of kindness here, an unexpected smile there, the tears from sharing someone’s sorrow—these are life’s treasures—and they are heaven’s treasures, too. When we live and love generously, when we open our hearts to God, to others, and to all the world around us—we find riches beyond imagination.