

“A Heart to Give: From the Heart”

Matthew 6:19-21

October 10, 2021

I'm not sure when they first became necessary, but I do know they are now pervasive, ubiquitous, everywhere you turn—dozens of them dotted across the Indianapolis region. If you travel on the highway, you can count them off one by one. They sit behind automatic gates. They are well-secured, climate-controlled, brightly lit, open twenty-four hours a day. Rows and rows of them, non-descript unit after non-descript unit. We call them “self-storage” centers. Have you ever stopped to think about what is inside those units? I have because I have a four year old who asks, “Daddy, what’s in those?” Of course I recognize the possibility that maybe you know exactly what is in one of them. I imagine dining room tables and baby cribs. I imagine collections of books and magazines, boxes of knick-knacks, treasured heirlooms. I imagine sports trophies, box springs, and mattresses. All the tattered belongings of people, people like you and me, people who can't let it go. Or, perhaps, people like you and me who hold onto the hope that maybe soon the next generation will finally see the value in those things that have mattered so much to us.

Self-storage. I know it's not intentional, but I'm a preacher, and the term does cause me to wonder: How many selves are stored in those units? How many identities locked up along with those possessions? Whole lives packaged away in wistful nostalgia of what once was, or distant dreams about what could be again. Self-storage—our identity warehoused in the things that we own. Possessions that come to possess us. It strikes me that we have become so comfortable defining ourselves by what we have that the impulse is no longer even questioned. Not debatable. For if the acquisition and consumption of things is the focus of so much of our

lives, then those things must matter deeply. Or why else would we spend so many of our hours and our days collecting them? Self-storage.

It's the middle of October, and I'm going to talk to you for the next two weeks about commitment. Before you tune out or scan the room for the least obvious exit, hear this: When we speak of commitment in the church, we're at the center of the gospel message. The only topic about which Jesus had more to say was the Kingdom of God itself, and often the two are held in close proximity. So this is no two-week pause in our regularly-scheduled programming to raise money for next year's budget. This is about the heart of our faith. It's about the determining of our priorities. It's about the naming of what matters most in our lives. And so, this morning we begin with this powerful teaching of Jesus about how we demonstrate the convictions and inclinations of our hearts, how we know what matters most. In other words, where we store our souls, ourselves, our hearts.

This morning's few verses from Matthew's Gospel are striking in their clarity and in their simplicity. Though the Sermon on the Mount has become a celebrated and familiar teaching, it's worth noting that the original audience of these words was not some massive crowd, but those whom Jesus had specifically called to follow him. If you turn back to Matthew Chapter 5, you see that Jesus has ascended the mountain to get away from the crowd. He's gathered his disciples for intimate, specific teaching. The sermon is filled with words that come to define Christian living. Words like, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Words like, “Blessed are meek and the merciful.” Words like, “You are the light of the world

and the salt of the earth.” Words like, “You shall love your enemies. Forgive as you have been forgiven.”

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus seeks to define the priorities of his disciples, what will matter most. And in this morning’s text, he has two clear instructions for his disciples when it comes to the question of our priorities and principles.

Instruction number one: Invest in what will last. Or as Jesus says, “Do not store up treasure for yourselves where moth and rust consume.” That last word, *broxis* in Greek, is best understood as “eaten away,” that gradual consumption. Anyone who has opened a storage box and discovered holey sweaters knows what Jesus meant about the moths. But in a more general sense, don’t we tend to cling to those things that are slowly eaten away? Not bad things. Not unimportant things. But things like our accomplishments, our nest eggs, our prized possessions, or even our health. Not bad things, but none of them have ultimate staying power. For in the end, we will leave this earthly life the same way we entered it, absolutely vulnerable, utterly empty-handed. In the most literal sense, earthly death is the great equalizer. Nothing we create while we’re here goes with us to the other side. And so Jesus wants to warn his disciples against carefully storing up those things that will never last, lest we be like the man in his haunting parable who builds large barns and then larger barns to accommodate all that he has acquired. He isolates himself from others by the consumption and acquisition of his possessions, and finally his life ends with many possessions and much despair.

By contrast, we are commanded to store our treasures in heaven, to invest in those things that will not be eaten away by moths or subject to rust. To invest in what lasts. The question is: What lasts? What might that be? I find a compelling answer in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. Actually three compelling answers. Paul, reflecting on the spiritual gifts of the faith community, turns his attention in the thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians to the gifts of the spirit that will last. And finally there are only three that come to

his heart and mind. What lasts? Faith, hope and love abide, these three. And the greatest of these is love. We are to invest in what lasts. Faith, hope and love are pretty good priorities for each of us individually and for our congregation. As I survey the priorities Second Church is pursuing, I see faith, hope, and love in abundance. I see commitments to raising children in the faith, a faith that will take hold in their lives and direct their future. I see a priority of shaping young adults with a message of meaning, deeper than those they receive from the world. I see a priority in worshiping God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength. I see a priority in sharing love with those in greatest need in our community, therefore enabling hope to take root, loving one another and all those whom God sends our way. Invest in what lasts, Jesus says.

The second command is really more of a statement of fact. I suggest it runs two ways. Where your money goes, Jesus says, that’s where your heart goes. Or, in his words, “For wherever your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” It’s an invitation to ask: Where do you choose to invest your life? Where do you choose to spend the gifts of time and energy that have been allotted to you? Where do you choose to commit your money and your resources?” Jesus is clear that the answer to those questions is the same as the answer to the question of where your heart lies. In other words, if you want to know about your priorities, take a look at your calendar, take a look at your bank statement. No matter what we say or how we feel, our actions and our decisions will reveal our priorities. This season of commitment is always a good time to consider those priorities. It’s a task that requires prayer, discernment, and honest evaluation. It involves asking ourselves again: What will last? What matters most? It really is all about priorities.

One of the greatest gifts of my vocation is the opportunity to witness my sisters and brothers in faith who testify to their priorities by investing their lives in what matters most. I’m talking of course about you all. I get to see in a way you may not how much of what happens in this community of faith happens with no

fanfare or recognition. Simply God's people going about the work of investing their hearts in the work of ministry to which God has called us together. If you've ever received a card or a phone call in the midst of a trying situation or through the journey of grief, you know the value of community. If you've ever served in the food pantry or sung in the choir, if you've pulled weeds in the garden, if you've greeted worshippers on a Sunday morning or set up refreshments for a memorial service, if you've ever been deeply moved by a new insight in Bible study, if you've ever listened as our children sing on the Chancel steps or witnessed the wonder of Vacation Bible School, if you've ever heard the reports of our youth after a weeklong service trip or the faith statements of our ninth-graders, you know this is a community that invests in what will last. You know that generosity and commitment, faith, hope, and love abide.

Earlier I said that these words of Jesus were a statement of fact that worked two ways. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." It's a kind of existential palindrome, true no matter which order you choose. Most often, it is taken to mean that the use of our financial resources discloses—reveals, demonstrates, shows—the inclinations and values of your heart. We put our money where our hearts are.

That is true. Equally true, and perhaps less appreciated, is the inverse: Our hearts (our passions, our values, our desires, our convictions) are shaped by the choices we make in where to spend and invest our financial resources.

So, you might say that our priorities are both disclosed and determined by the use of our possessions. I have the joy of seeing this play out all the time. As folks expand their commitment to the church, a growth in faith so often follows. The practice of generosity deepens the walk of faith.

At Second, we are blessed with hearts to give, and we are blessed with giving hearts. It's a good time for each of us to put our treasure where our hearts are, to invest in what lasts, to ensure the future and build upon the foundations of the past. To love God with

our whole hearts—those words from the Book of Deuteronomy, often called the Shema, are invited, encouraged, compelled, required to be written, not only in our minds, but deep in our hearts.

Over in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus had this to say to his disciples: "From those to whom much is given, much will be required." Now, I understand that this may *sound* like a threat. I assure you, it is a gift. Like any good leader, Jesus demands much of us, but never more than he is willing to give. Never more.

It would—I think—be insincere not to acknowledge the reality that we are a privileged people, that we have been given much, offered abundance, charged to share. I know you have many obligations, desires, and worthwhile uses of your resources. There are bills that must be paid. There are children who must be educated, clothed, and fed. There are projects for which you've been saving. There are plans for retirement, for travel, for the gift of time shared with loved ones. And then there are the luxuries that hard work or blessing afford us. There are so many ways to make use of what you have, so many worthy causes in which you feel drawn to invest. At the risk of the kind of bluntness that is not usually my style, here goes: Your commitment to the work of ministry through your giving to the church matters in the deepest sense. *It matters.* Why? Because it will last. Why? Because it will shape your life.

A few weeks ago, I was having a conversation with a member of our church who has chosen the path of extraordinary generosity. I asked him how he had come to this decision, and the answer came swiftly. "I learned generosity from my parents. We didn't have a whole lot growing up, but I always knew what was most important to them. I saw how giving to the church enriched their lives, how it gave a spring in their step, deeper meaning and purpose, how much *joy* it gave them to give." Do not commit what you have to those places where moths and rust will eat it away. Invest in what lasts.

The Sunday after that conversation, which was on a Thursday afternoon, following the eleven o'clock

worship service, I was standing outside talking with folks when one of the children of our church ran back into the building from the parking lot. She had in her hand a Ziploc bag, and in that bag there was a five-dollar bill. Here's the story. The day before, a glorious late summer Saturday, she had hosted a lemonade stand in her front yard. It was a lucrative enterprise, earning her a total that day of ten dollars. When her parents asked her how she'd like to spend that hard-earned money, the girl was decisive. Half of it would go to the church. Why? "Because they help people." Friends, the practice of giving shapes our lives, fills our hearts. It offers us the freedom to find our identity not in the things we store but in the goodness and grace of God we share.

In the end, this life is all about priorities. Where shall we invest the abundance with which we have been blessed?

Jesus had an answer. "Where your treasure is..."
Well, you know the rest. Amen.