

Sermon
Calvary Lutheran Church
August 7, 2022
Ninth Sunday After Pentecost
Luke 12:32-40

Just to let you know that I was feeling my way through this gospel lesson as I wrote it. I had an idea about treasure and heaven and purses and God's economy that was not fully fleshed out as I put fingers to keyboard. We walk by faith and not by sight!

In 2006, the musical *Hadestown* was written by Anais Mitchell, and later revised with Rachel Chavkin. I never knew about it until now. It is a modern take on the Greek play about Orpheus and Eurydice. Hades, the god of the underworld, is also in it. He is portrayed as a businessman, and his business, in the underworld, is building a wall. Hmm. Of course, Hades doesn't build it. There is a song, "Why We Build the Wall." And here is a distilled version of the lyrics.

Why do we build the wall?
 We build the wall to keep us free.
 How does the wall keep us free?
 The wall keeps out the enemy.
 Who do we call the enemy?
 The enemy is poverty.
 [And why is poverty the enemy?]
 Because they want what we have got.
 And why do we have what they should want?
 We have a wall to work upon.
 We have work and they have none.
 Our work is never done.
 And the war is never done.
 The enemy is poverty and the wall keeps out the enemy
 And we build the wall to keep us free.

Do I need to point out that this is circular reasoning? It is also a brilliant explanation of the trap of having our treasure on earth. The more we have, the more we worry. The more we worry, the more we need, the more we need, the more we get, the more we have...

Hey, it was just last week where that brother was angling for his share of the inheritance. And Jesus talked about a different kind of treasure. Not gold or silver, not retirement funds – oh boy – not property or IRAs, not bank accounts, not antiques, collectibles, rare art, cryptocurrency. Don't get me started. But rather, something Jesus calls "treasure in heaven." "Where no thief comes near and no moth destroys."

Did I say last week that the English word "treasure" comes from the Greek word *thesaurus*. Yes, I bet you never knew that Roget's Thesaurus is a treasure! Actually, *thesaurus* doesn't mean "treasure" exactly, or at least in terms of things of value. It means a storehouse. So Roget's Thesaurus is a storehouse of synonyms and antonyms. (I imagine that, since the era of computers, there are some here who don't even know what Roget was known for....)

So when Jesus says, "where your treasure is," he probably doesn't mean, Where your valuables are, but rather, Where you keep them. (Do you get the distinction?). In Jesus' day, the storeroom was likely in one's house, though, as I have discovered, there were also banks. The Israelites learned about banking when they were in exile in Babylonia! But those of real wealth had palaces where they kept their things. And guards with weapons to protect those things.

Which is why banks are such a great invention. They protect our money without us all having to have a safe in our house. Did you ever notice that banks tend to be built with big fronts, big facades? That go well above the roofline? That trick is meant to convey solidity. And big safes and vaults. For the illusion of security. An illusion because, as we know, where there are bigger safes, there are better thieves. And today, more complicated computer programs mean more inventive hackers. Nothing on earth, it turns out, is impregnable. We KNOW what Jesus is talking about. Thieves always break in.

So No, Jesus says, don't put your valuables in an earthly storehouse. Liquidate your assets, and give the resulting money away! OK, I'm going to skip over that part. You and I will rattle with that one. Jesus adds, "Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven." This is what I want to explore. What is this treasure, this storehouse, in heaven? Or, what is in that storehouse? Or, what can we possibly store there?

Well, not anything we can put our hands on, touch, feel, taste. Nothing that we need a banker or a storage facility for. Nothing that we'd have to pay someone to protect. Do you have any idea?.....

I'm thinking, to start, our hope. Really, that is a huge thing for us in this time. Hope that there is a plan amidst the craziness. Hope that we will be cared for by God. Hope that in the end, there will be beauty. How about love? Here is where this interpretation might break down a bit. Because what good is love if we store it up? What does love mean if it's not love in action? I suppose the same could be said for faith. Faith delayed, or faith ignored, or faith saved up for a rainy day – that doesn't make sense. Once again, faith is only faith if it's expressed, if it's in use.

So help me think through this. If the things that we might possibly want to store in our heavenly storehouse are not things that have a shelf life, what good is a storehouse in heaven? I guess from this standpoint, there is no need. Because if we need something, God can give it to us. So, in a way, our storehouse IS GOD. Or rather, our unending source. So why would Jesus be talking this way?

Martin Luther took great exception to the idea of his time that the saints of history had so much merit built up from their lives that there was an excess, and that this excess could be transferred to people, for a price, called an indulgence, which incidentally or not was used to

build, say, St. Peter's in Rome. This practice had a lot to do with Luther posting those Theses. The implication was that all the gifts and the fruits of the Spirit could be stored!

Maybe to break this logjam, let's go back a verse to hear Jesus' word, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Is there a difference between what we know as the kingdom of God or the realm of God, and heaven? At different times, Jesus said both "The kingdom of God is near," and "The kingdom of God is among us." So it is possible that this repository, this storehouse, this wealth of faith, hope and love, of kindness and good will, of generosity and mercy, of encouragement and power, is here, among us. By God's good pleasure!

And how does it work, this economy of God? Well, you probably know already. It's the interchange of everything I've already talked about. I was listening to a podcast of a woman who loved a man who was great and inventive, and by the way had a habit of stealing vehicles of all kinds, which carried him into jail, and from which he escaped repeatedly, and then went was brought back in. This back and forth really took a toll on their family life. And the wife was asked in an interview, didn't you get fed up with your husband? And she said, I go to church, and my daughters go to church, and there I learned about forgiveness. So I can forgive my husband, because of the way he had to grow up. Now I'm not going to get into the ramifications of forgiveness here. But rather than to say that this woman was drawing on the storehouse of heaven, IN her congregation!

I know that you all are people of faith and hope and love and all, and those heavenly possessions makes a big difference in your lives and the lives of those around you. You create circles and communities of faith, hope and love. Wow! It makes a difference that when Luke wrote, in Greek, "where your treasure is," the word "your" is in the plural form. Not like

Matthew, who for reasons unknown wrote “your” in the singular form. Luke is reminding us that our storehouse is not individual, but communal. When we come to church, and then live our lives as we may, doing acts of mercy and the like, we are drawing on a joint account.

And here’s where I want to talk about the ripple effect. You know about this, right? It’s a commonly understood phenomenon. Just as when a rock or something else gets dropped in a still body of water, it sends out little waves in every direction, so when actions are done, they have their ripples as well. I was going to give you an example of a prominent person who spreads negativity with great ripple effect, but I don’t need to give that person any more publicity than they already have.

I will alternatively claim that the ripple effect can apply to good news as well! Indeed so, and moreso. The congregation Mary and I led in Oakland had that music ministry, putting out four CDs called *Songs of Hope and Healing*. Our little church, with fine musicians and an open spirit. Songs that were gentle and meaningful. And we gave them away, funding more to be burned, one thousand at a time, as needed. And we were surprised to learn where they went. Perhaps the biggest surprise was when someone told us that *Songs of Hope and Healing* were being played on the Vatican switchboard for people on hold. But also, over and over, that people were truly receiving healing and peace from listening to the music.

Our interest as a congregation is to spread the love and peace and healing that we know in Jesus, best as we can. To be encouraged by one another in that daily joy, to report what comes back to us, to delight that there is no law against sharing our joy and the reasons for it, that our store of faith and hope and love will never run out, that what goes around, comes around, that we never know how far our ripples will travel, to the sixth degree of separation and beyond. We both draw on and ARE God’s storehouse of riches. Amen.

Rev. Brian Stein-Webber

August 6, 2022