

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Jody McDevitt, co-pastor

August 7, 2016
19th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 12:32-40

Unfailing Treasure

There is an ancient Jewish tradition which is coming back into vogue, not just among Jews, but in the larger society. Rooted in biblical stories such as the one found in Genesis 49, where the patriarch Jacob gathers his sons around him and offers each his last words, the tradition is known as the “ethical will.” In other words, it’s a will that expresses not who’s going to get what property or money, but the legacy of values, principles, and the deepest core beliefs which the elder wants to pass on to the next generation.

A few years ago, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh named Randy Pausch received a terminal diagnosis when he was at the peak of his career. As a husband and father of young children, he seized the moment while he was still outwardly healthy, and gave a lecture in an auditorium of 400 people which has since been viewed by millions on Youtube. For the reading audience, it became a best-selling book called *The Last Lecture*. Pausch summarized what he wanted his children to know after he was gone, and millions of others have wanted to hear it, too. His talk was anything but morose. With humor and vitality, he spoke of following your dreams whatever the obstacle. It was his ethical will.

What would you say in your ethical will? What is your legacy for the next generation? Your age doesn’t matter here—it’s your values and what you do with them in your life that matters. And like the watchful slaves in Jesus’ parable, it’s always wise to be prepared.

Now, Christians in the first century believed that the second coming of Christ was imminent. Two thousand years later, it still hasn’t happened. So the parables of warning to be prepared for Christ’s coming, rather than being deemed irrelevant, can be read with another level of meaning. Yes, we are to be ready for Christ’s coming whenever that might be. But on a personal level, the inescapable inevitability we all face is our death. We are mortal, and we do not know what day or night might be our last. So we should always be prepared, always ready to greet our master.

And whether or not we actually take the time and effort to sit down and write an ethical will, the way we live our lives will write that will for us. Was she kind and caring for others, or did her habit of gossip and backstabbing betray her sweet talk? Was he a person of integrity you could count on in time in need, or was he more focused on climbing the ladder of his own success? What are the core values exemplified in our lives? Are they worldly values, or the values of the kingdom of God? Are we laying up for ourselves the short-lived treasure of this world, or the unfailing treasure of heaven?

Shortly before these verses in Luke’s gospel is the parable of the rich fool, whose greed motivates him to store his abundant crops, building larger and larger barns—until his unexpected death exposes the foolishness of hoarding. That was last week’s scripture. This week’s scripture expands that lesson. Not only is it foolish to be greedy, to hoard when there is plenty of opportunity to share, it is also foolish to invest our confidence in anything transient or worldly. There are some verses in between these two lessons which challenge us not to be anxious, but to strive for God’s kingdom. That leads into today’s opening verse, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

Do not be afraid! For when we *give up* our fear, our anxiety, and our worry, and when we *give up* clutching our possessions as if they might save us, when we *give to* others—that's when we start to receive the gift of the kingdom.

Let me take a little side trip here to talk about this "kingdom." It's a bit of a foreign word to us, we who live in a nation which threw off the monarchy and established a way of governing ourselves "of the people, by the people, and for the people." "Kingdom" sounds a bit archaic, from the world of fairy tales. We might be confused into thinking that it is a geographic place, but in its New Testament context, it is not geographic at all. Rather, the phrase commonly translated as "kingdom of God" is more pervasive than geography, and more about time than place. It carries the meaning of "rule," or "reign," or "dominion." The gospel of Matthew follows the Hebrew convention of revering God's name by not saying it aloud, substituting the word "heaven." So in Matthew's gospel we hear Jesus preaching about the "kingdom of heaven" in exactly the same way that in Mark and Luke he speaks of the "kingdom of God." It's the same thing. Jesus preaches the kingdom more than he preaches any other subject. It can even be said that all of his preaching concerns the past, present, and future rule of God. Christian existentialist Nicholas Berdyaev defined the Kingdom of God as "the image of a full, perfect, beautiful, free and divine life." (*Weavings*, Jan-Feb 1995, pp. 24-25) The phrase, "kingdom of God," asserts that God is sovereign and God is good. And this little verse in today's scripture tells us that it is God's great desire and intention to give us all the benefits of living under the rule of this sovereign goodness.

But sometimes, as St. Augustine observed, "God wants to give us something but cannot, because our hands are full—there's nowhere for [God] to put it." (quoted by Deborah Smith Douglas, *Weavings*, Nov-Dec 2005, p. 12) Too often the fullness in our hands consists of the temporal "stuff" we claim as "mine," held in purses worn out by our grasping hands. It's not that things and money are bad, it's that we hold them too closely, too tightly to our hearts, filling up the space where God wishes to dwell. Jesus tells us, "You cannot serve God and wealth." (Mt 6:24) And, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven." (Mt 19:24) And, "Sell everything you own and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." (Lk 18:22) Jesus is direct and clear. "For where your treasure is, your heart will be also." (Lk 12:34) And his advice, his word of wisdom, is to treasure the eternal, the kingdom God wants to give us, which even death cannot take away from us.

The treasure of which Jesus speaks is the precious relationship of trust in a trustworthy God. We call that **faith**. Faith is the relationship which ties us to the eternal, the divine, the good and just and loving God we know in Christ. Faith is the sure knowledge of that which is unprovable, the conviction of things not seen, the bond of trust in the One who made us, and made us for love. Faith is the gift which helps us catch glimpses of the kingdom of God in the midst of this world, which helps us recognize that we are not alone, and which keeps us going forward even when life's undertow is especially strong. Faith is a gift which helps us see God's promise in the stars above us, and in the ground below our feet. Thank heaven, we are not the first ones to seek faith. We have centuries of predecessors to show us how they did it. We have a community to support us when our personal faith is weak. But faith is personal, a gift God wants to give to each of us. And when faith grows in us, it transforms us from those who cling to the things of this world to those who hold onto the eternal.

And that may give us something to say in an ethical will, but even better, it makes our lives a testament to the way of God in us. Fear is overcome by faith. Grasping turns into generosity. The goal of all our treasure seeking becomes the treasures of heaven. And the prayer Jesus taught us is answered, for the kingdom comes and God's will is done on earth, as it is in heaven.

Henri Nouwen retells a story from the tradition of desert spirituality. He gives the characters, two simple people, the names John and Sandy.

One day John said to Sandy, "We've never had an argument. Let's have an argument like other people have." Sandy asked, "But how can we start an argument?" John answered, "It's very simple. I take a brick, and say, 'It's mine,' and then you say, "No, it's mine," and then we have an argument." So they sat down and John took a brick and said, "This brick is mine." Sandy looked gently at him and said, "Well, if it's yours, take it." And so, they could not have an argument.

If only we all were as simple as John and Sandy. Nouwen observes,

As long as we keep bricks in our hands and speak about mine and thine, our little power games gradually will escalate into big power games and our big power games will lead to hatred, violence, and war. . . . But when we dare to let go of our bricks, empty our hands, and raise them up to the One who is our true refuge and our true stronghold, our poverty opens us to receive power from above, power that heals, power that will be a true blessing for ourselves and for our world.

(In *Weavings*, Jan-Feb 1995, p. 44)

He's talking, of course, about the power of the kingdom of God.

"Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Let the unfailing treasure of faith in God be your #1 investment focus now.

For if you do, when you leave this earthly life you will leave a legacy which will keep transforming all it touches, and God's good earth will become a bit more like God's eternal heaven.