

WHY GIVE?
Matthew 6:19-21

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on October 28, 2018, the Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia. This is the fourth of five sermons this Fall focused on “Why” questions related to the church: “Why Church?”; “Why Westminster?”; “Why Join?” “Why Give?” “Why Tithe?”

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

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In my first church in west Texas in the early 1980s, there was a member in his thirties, a local banker, who had grown up in a Presbyterian Church in a smaller and even dustier town a few miles further west. Richard had a gift with youth. He volunteered to teach the Senior High Sunday School class, and after a few weeks, we were having thirty to forty Senior Highs from 9:30 to 10:30 each Sunday morning. During Lent, they conducted worship services in the chapel each Friday morning and invited the congregation. We would have thirty youth and another fifty adults – at 7:00 a.m. for the five Fridays of that holy season. Richard was a gifted storyteller – as many Texans are – and had a spark and charisma that led him to speak to youth where they were. It was great for me to simply sit back and watch all that unfold.

But there was one area in which Richard’s faith had not yet developed. Around stewardship time, when the church was asking people to make an annual financial pledge, Richard said to me: “There are a lot of people in this town who give plenty of money to church.” I suppose he knew, as he was their banker. “But I just give my time, not my money.”

I was young in those days, and didn’t really know how to respond to Richard, though I knew that somehow it doesn’t work that way. Now, thirty-five years later, I think I can respond.

In the Fall sermon series in which I have been preaching on “Why” questions:

- Why Church?
- Why Westminster?
- Why Join?

I am ready to tackle Question Number Four today: “Why Give?” and then conclude next Sunday with Question Number Five: “Why Tithe?”

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Why give to the church – not only our time as Richard did – but a considered, thoughtful percentage of our income as well? Why give our money – as well as our time – to the church?

I.

The first reason to give to the church is that – despite its flaws and public sins – there is no more sacred entity with which to give a portion of our material resources.

In the first part of the brief, picaresque saying that forms our scripture reading today, Jesus draws a stark, arresting contrast between “treasures on earth” and “treasures in heaven.”

*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth [he says],
Where moth and rust consume
And where thieves break in and steal;*

*But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven,
Where neither moth nor rust consumes
And where thieves do not break in and steal.*

When we hear this, we might initially think Jesus is labeling as evil all the “treasures on earth” of which he speaks. But he is not. He is simply saying that the blessings we have in this life are subject to the same processes to which we as finite human creature are subject: decline and death – “where moth and rust consume” – or destruction at the hands of our fellow human beings – “where thieves break in and steal,” where shooters walk in and shoot.

Saint Augustine once wrote:

*There is... an impressiveness in lovely material things—gold and silver and everything,
... in contact with the flesh [there is] an accord between it and what it touches [that] has huge appeal...
Worldly honor and the power to give order and maintain the upper hand have their own kind of
attraction...¹*

Lovely material things; the flesh and what it touches; the capacity to give order and maintain the upper hand, especially when the forces of evil and disorder seem so in control: These are indeed “treasures on earth.” They are beautiful. They are powerful. They are life giving. They are life sustaining.

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This summer, five homes on our short block in this neighborhood sold and brought new people onto the lawns and streets. Two large houses on the corner that face Cameron Mills have gone from sitting empty to having families – one with four children and one with two and another on the way. Picket fences have been erected. Playground equipment has appeared in the yards; SUV’s in the driveways. In the evening lights are on throughout the houses as if to say: “People live here. There are children and parents and grandparents and pets. Come on in.”

¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by Sarah Ruden (New York: The Modern Library, 2017), Book 2, x, page 43.

A few days ago we received a flier in our mailbox not enlisting us to vote for a particular candidate or organize for a zoning controversy. Rather, the flier simply read:

*We are moving in!
Michael and Donna
And our pups, Gino and Olivia.*

*On Wednesday, October 24th
Our movers will be moving us in.
Hopefully, their presence will not be intrusive
To you or the neighborhood,
But if they are, please don't hesitate to let us know.*

*Come by, call or text!
We are looking forward
To meeting our ne neighbors!*

The good fortune of people to live in this neighborhood – with old homes filled with “character” (which is what you say when the paint chips), with public and private schools that are as good as any in the country, with sports galore, with churches and synagogues, with physical and intellectual proximity to one of the most powerful cities in the world (even when it is fractious and divided and its leaders threatened with violence) – all these are “treasures on earth.” They are “lovely material things.” And they are worth the time, effort, financial and tax support we give them to create the life we have here.

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In his two verse saying, Jesus does not denigrate these treasures. But he reminds us that that none of them last forever.

- We who benefit from the blessings of this neighborhood will move on.
- We will pass on.
- Even the most brilliant breakthrough that emerges from across the river in this unfinished historical experiment called “America” will be supplanted by another breakthrough, like the telephone replaced the telegraph, the Internet the telephone.
- Even the most endearing memorial erected by artist and architect will find the attention it receives wane in the face of another.
- Even the most intimate love that arises between parent and child, spouse and spouse, in the “home-fullness” of the homes around us will be supplanted by similar love within another family, then another, then another.

Augustine thus concluded: *“These lowest things do have their delights, but not in comparison to you, my God, who made everything.”*

*[Therefore] store up for yourselves treasures in heaven,
Where neither moth nor rust consumes
And where thieves do not break in and steal.*

Back in the days when most people gave to the church by writing a check at home before coming to worship (so you didn't have to scramble for a pen as the plates were being passed down the pew), a friend told me that his wife – who was the member of the marriage who paid the bills and thus wrote the check for the church – would always write in the “Memo” line in the lower left of the check the word “Thanks.”

“T-H-A-N-K-S”

When we give to God, through what we give to the church, we make the most *sacred* gift of our lives. “Neither moth nor rust consumes and thieves do not break in and steal.”

II.

The second reason we give to the church is counter-intuitive. We give to the church not primarily because the church needs the money to pay the utility bills or shovel the snow (which of course it does), but on the contrary, we give to the church to *deepen our faith*.

This insight comes from the word order Jesus uses in the last sentence of our passage. “Where your *treasure* is, there your *heart* will be also.”

In a society in which we have some discretion about how we use our money, the normal process is for us to try something out and *then* pay for it.

- If we taste a new flavor at Baskin and Robbins, then order.
- We look at a college, then apply.
- We walk through a home, then make an offer.

In all these instances, the order is “where our *heart* is, there our *treasure* will be also.”

But Jesus reverses the order: “Where your *treasure* is, there your will be also.”

The odd thing about Christian faith is that we first give ourselves to it and our hearts then follow. I can almost guarantee that once we give a significant portion of our time, energy, talent, thought, prayer, and financial resources to Westminster Presbyterian Church, then our care and concern, our energy, imagination, intelligence, and love for the life and ministry of this congregation will follow in abundance.

- We will find more things we don't like and more things we do like.
- We will find more people we struggle to admire and more we admire outright.
- We will find more theological questions for which we do not have answers and we will find more theological questions for which we have decided answers are not quite as necessary as we once thought.

“Where your treasure is – your time and your energy and your money – there your heart will follow.” We are not consumers, testing something out and then deciding whether or not to buy; we are members of the community of faith, putting ourselves into something and then feeling our hearts follow.

III.

I opened with the story of a person from another church who gave his time and talent but not his treasure. I want to end with a story of a person from this church who gave both.

Many of you will remember the distinguished older gentleman, always dressed in coat and tie, who would sit in the chair outside the library door and then come in for the service as it started. His name was Don Fowler.

Don was born in rural South Dakota in 1912. He graduated from the University of South Dakota, entered the military, went to work for the government. He was one of the first people to move to Tennessee to help bring electricity to Appalachia through the Tennessee Valley Authority. Afterward, he returned to Washington and assumed what became a long and distinguished career with the World Bank.

Along the way, he married a woman from Alabama named Betsy – (Aren't all women born in Alabama in the nineteen-teens named Betsy?). They raised two daughters in this community and joined Westminster in the early 1950s, though Don took ten years longer than Betsy to join.

The toll of aging visited Betsy long before Don, and he cared for her at home until she died in 2011 at age 95.

When I came here as Pastor in 2004, Don was the oldest member of the Session. Others sometimes had to help him follow the course of business at a meeting, but he kept up pretty well. He normally left evening meetings at 8:30, not wanting to leave Betsy alone for more than an hour. After he served on the Session he served on the Foundation Board and on the Administration and Finance Committee, attending night meetings at the church once or twice a month, as well as adult education and worship every Sunday.

In the last few years of his life, he took up blogging, and would engage in spirited but intelligent and respectful blogs with members, friends, and people all over the world about matters political and economic. He somehow got connected with a member of my former church in Iowa, who shared his politics and his passion for expressing them.

When Betsy died, Don helped set up a portion of her estate as an Endowment in our Foundation to support the participation of children and youth in music. When he died in 2013, the Session added his bequest to that fund.

Don once told Nancy Bea, our administrator at the time: “The reason I don't get off committees is because I'm afraid people will stop asking me to do things.”

Don did not automatically accept orthodox views of faith or its traditional formulations. But he was always searching for the kernel of truth he knew lay within Christianity. In his searching, he gave proportionately of his time. He gave proportionately of his talent. He gave proportionately of his income and of his estate. He gave of his treasure, and as long as heart beat into its 101st year, it never stopped following as well.

Amen.