

**STUFF**  
**16 August 2020**  
**Beaverkill Community Church**  
**Robert Jones**

Today I'd like to talk a bit about *Matthew 6:19-21*:

[**19** "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; **20** but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. **21** For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.] [New Revised Standard Version]

Mary tells me that this passage was in the Lectionary for Ash Wednesday, way back in February, so I guess I'm a little late. But I composed what was only my second talk way back in August of 2010, on this passage, and I've always wished I could revisit the talk. I propose to do that today. I'm still not satisfied that what I have to say is right, but we're running out of Sundays, so here it is.

Now, essentially the same thought as today's occurs at Luke 12: 33-34: (33) Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. (34) For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

But the Matthew version is the one I grew up with, and I guess I prefer it. It's one of my favorite scriptures. Jesus, of course, had a lot to say about riches and possessions; this selection is one of the most famous. I have no way of knowing whether Jesus was the first to state what he says here, and don't care all that much; I give him credit, not necessarily for inventing the idea but for having gotten it more or less right.

Some initial points:

+ Let's look a little more closely at what he's saying. It's certainly not as harsh and uncompromising as some of the other things he's said about the role of riches, or of possessions generally, in our lives. For one thing, it isn't riches that Jesus is objecting to; it's "storing them up," or as some translations have it, "laying them up," accumulating them. And the only thing intrinsically wrong he finds in storing treasures up "on earth" is that moth, rust and thieves get at them. The *main* problem he finds in storing up treasures on earth is what they do to your heart. Which we'll get to.

+ Another observation: It's one of those sayings of Jesus that can be evaluated on its merits as a moral insight, not against a background of beliefs about Jesus's divinity or the entrance requirements for salvation. Many of Jesus's moral sayings or "commandments" only command the attention of someone who already sees Jesus as divine, as having the keys to the kingdom, as it were. But this is not one of them. It's a deliverance of moral insight.

As Patricia [Adams] showed us years ago, Thomas Jefferson thought that, aside from issues about Jesus's divinity, you could file out a body of great moral teachings from the gospels, constituting what he called "the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man," and he compiled a volume of these teachings. This saying of Jesus's that we're discussing today made it into the Jefferson Bible, I think at Jefferson 3: 19-21. It's to my mind a saying that speaks with its own authority and doesn't borrow from Jesus's. Jesus's core insight here is the wisdom in the tag line: "there your heart will be also." His point is not so much disparagement of mundane riches, but a warning.

And it's important to see Jesus's point clearly here: It's what you store up that determines where your heart will be, not the other way around. Jesus's point is not that storing up treasures

on earth is bad because it means you're greedy or selfish or whatever, but rather that if, for whatever reason, you lay up treasures on earth, your heart will follow them. Jesus doesn't say "Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also" But just the opposite. Where your treasure is, your heart will follow.

+ Now it's true that, even though I think you can consider Jesus's saying on its own merits, he meant it as a pitch for heaven: "But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven." Throughout my life, when I encountered this phrase, I always thought of its meaning as pretty transparent. But after thinking about it, I'm not sure what it is to store up treasures in heaven. One minister I've heard of had a take on that: Speaking of tithing, he said in essence: I know that you can't take it with you, but I like to send some on up ahead, so it will be there waiting when I get there.

Of course, writers on the Gospels have weighed in on how to store up treasures in heaven. It's been pointed out that in Matthew 6 Jesus promises that God will reward the person who gives alms in secret (v.4), and who prays in secret (v.6) and who fasts in secret (v. 18); more importantly, in 19:21, he said to the man who had many possessions, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure..." And there are plenty of other clues. However that may be, I have another fish to fry.

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We should remember that Jesus's admonition against storing up treasures "on earth" only fully reaches treasures that are victims to moth, rust and thieves, like cars, money, houses and such; things, possessions. It's less effective against "treasures" that aren't "things," like love, friendship, helping others, giving yourself to a worthy cause, mastery of a skill or an art, or just smelling the roses. And this more restricted reading – Store not up treasures that are mere things,

at risk of moth, rust and thievery – rather store up treasures that are free of these risks – now enjoys some currency, or course. There are plenty of examples of others saying essentially the same thing, or similar things, and we could discuss them until the cows come home. For just one example, many of us know the song, “A Satisfied Mind”:

“How many times have you heard someone say  
If I had his money, I’d do things my way.  
How little they know that it’s so hard to find  
One rich man in twenty with a satisfied mind.  
Now money won’t buy back your youth when you’re old  
Or a friend when you’re lonely or a heart that’s grown cold  
The wealthiest person is a pauper at times  
Compared to a man with a satisfied mind.  
When my life is over and my time has run out  
My friends and relations, I’ll leave them no doubt  
But one thing’s for certain, when it comes my time  
Gonna leave this old world with a satisfied mind.”

(By the way, in the interests of equal time, I have to admit that not everyone buys into the song’s disparagement of riches completely. Recall Pearl Bailey’s famous saying, “I’ve been rich and I’ve been poor – rich is better.” But let’s not go there now -- another time.)

I read a fine short sermon by a radio preacher on our scripture passage; the preacher found in the passage a message about “stuff” and our relation to it. And he quoted a routine by George Carlin entitled “A Place for my Stuff,” who made the point in his inimitable style:

"All you need in life is a little place for your stuff. That's all your house is—a place to keep your stuff. If you didn't have so much stuff, you wouldn't need a house. You could just walk around all the time. A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. You can see that when you're taking off in an airplane. You look down, you see everybody's got a little pile of stuff. All the little piles of stuff. And when you leave your house, you gotta lock it up. Wouldn't want somebody come by and take some of your stuff. That's what your house is—a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get ...more stuff. Sometimes you gotta move—gotta get a bigger house. Why? No room for your stuff anymore."

This minister who quoted Carlin saw Jesus's statement as being about stuff. And I think that works. What distinguishes human beings from the other animals? It used to be thought, the power of reason. Nope, look at chimps or dolphins. Toolmaking? Nope – chimps again. Sense of humor? – just try to take a stick away from a dog. He'll be laughing at you all the time. Nope, it's stuff. Man is the stuff-seeking animal. Oh, I know there are animals like squirrels, who put stuff away. But that's just food, right? I bet they don't think of it as possessions. And I've heard that some dogs bury things, but they don't stockpile it to show it off, do they? They don't "store them up." No, we people have got a corner on stuff.

In saying, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... for there your heart will be also," Jesus is saying, look out for stuff. Stuff is insidious! Piece by piece—a laptop, a car, a charger, a thousand dollars --, it's just stuff. But you start storing it up, by the roomful, or houseful, or lifelful, it's alive, and it will eat you up. And so maybe that's another way to read our text for today: Watch out for stuff. And when you do have to mess with stuff, .... Leave your

heart outside.

And that's what I think about that.