

### ***The True Treasures of the Kingdom***

In the name of the One who is first who for us made himself last, dear friends in Christ: You may be familiar with a public television program called *Antique Road Show*. For those who aren't it goes something like this: a group of expert appraisers visit a city and set up in a convention hall or other such large venue. And then for a couple days people in the area can bring items that they own and believe to be of some value, and have them evaluated by an expert free of charge. They bring all kinds of stuff: paintings, sculptures, jewelry, ceramics, furniture, old weapons, collections of various types, and all manner of heirlooms handed down for generations. Of the thousands of appraising sessions that take place, the editors of the show pick out a dozen or so of the most interesting. So, watching the program you learn a little history, you see some really unique and intriguing objects; but at the end of each appraisal it all comes down to the bottom line: what's it worth? And what makes the show fun it is that on one hand you have people who are sitting on treasures worth far more than they imagined, and on the other folks who think they have something worth a fortune that turns out to be a worthless piece of junk.

But that very split raises the question: just exactly how does one determine what something's value is? Some things have intangible sentimental value. The child's handprint on a slab of clay may be worth a lot to the child's mother but to no one else. And like they say: one man's trash is another man's treasure. To me a stamp is worth whatever it says on its face. I don't collect stamps and have no interest in the subject. But to an avid stamp collector it may be worth a lot. And with that in mind, the questions I'd like you to consider this morning are these: What's valuable to you? What treasures do you seek? I ask because today's Gospel is about seeking treasure, and perhaps about finding it in an unexpected place. Why, it may be that even now you're sitting on treasures worth far more than you imagine.

The text picks up where last week's left off and really hangs on what happened before, so we're going to have to back up a bit. A wealthy young man came up to Jesus and asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus told him to keep the commandments: don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, and so on. And as we heard, the man had a pretty high view of himself. He was blind to his many sins, so he replied, "I've done all that since my youth." Jesus had to show him that he wasn't as righteous as he thought he was, so he said, "You lack one thing. Go sell all that you have, give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. And come follow me." Hearing this, the man became discouraged. He found himself unwilling to leave his riches and life of luxury – even if it meant that he'd forfeit eternal life. To him his comfort in the temporal present was more valuable than his eternal future.

Now, as I pointed out last week, Jesus wasn't saying that the only way to get to heaven is to perfectly keep all the commandments, give away all your stuff, and literally follow him around from place to place. If that were the standard, no one could be saved. No, Jesus said this to show this man his sins – that his heart wasn't really focused on the right things. The man had made an idol of his wealth, one that he valued far more than the Lord. He had to see this so that he might be led to repentance and then to Jesus himself who saves people from their sins.

But it's as the man is walking away with his head down (and hopefully beginning to mull these things over) that Jesus looks at his disciples and says, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" Hearing this it's the disciples turn to be shocked and alarmed. Their jaws drop in unison. "What?" These words of Jesus stand in flat

contradiction to what they've always believed. It was a universal law, one of those things that "simply everybody knows": the Lord richly blesses those who his. To have great wealth is an indication of God's favor. He bestows it upon those who are *most* faithful to him. So, the more you have, the more you must be a child of God and part of his kingdom. But now Jesus comes along and says almost the opposite: that having great wealth is actually an impediment to entry into God's kingdom. We must have heard him wrong.

Seeing the look of astonishment and disbelief on his disciples' faces, Jesus says it again, even upping the ante. "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." There's no mistaking the meaning of those words. Thus the disciples are stumped. And since they recognize that with respect to wealth there are only two kinds of people in the world, those who are rich and those who would like to be rich – and no matter how much you've got, everyone wants more – they blurt out the obvious question, "Then who can be saved?" If what Jesus says is true, it would seem that no one is able to enter God's kingdom.

And that's absolutely right. No one rich, poor, some financial status in between is able to enter the kingdom of God. All have sinned and fall short of his glory. All are wicked, and with the wicked God cannot dwell. You cannot enter God's kingdom. And it's your wealth that helps keeps you out – the wealth you think you have. But here I'm speaking of moral capital: the relative richness of your soul. This is the problem we all have no matter how much money we've got stashed away. Everyone thinks they're essentially good. We all imagine that we're sitting on a mountain of merits that we've earned by all the good things we've done. It's a treasure that I have to offer God; a treasure that guarantees me a place in his kingdom – and a fairly high place at that. Now, coupling this with the prevalent idea that God rewards those who have spiritual wealth with material wealth, and it seems obvious that those who are rich in this world are the ones who stand highest in God's esteem. They have the greatest moral treasures of all – at least that's the way it seems in the eyes of the world.

But when the Lord gives all this merit we think is so valuable his expert appraisal, he declares it to be stinking garbage. It's worth less than nothing. It's offensive. Take it away. And how dare you think that you with your sin soiled hands can do anything fit to offer the Lord. You can't. You must come to the realization that before God you stand not only without treasures of goodness to offer him, you're actually deeply in debt. He owes you nothing. And what you owe him is an eternity of suffering in hell. You cannot enter the kingdom of God.

But with God all things are possible. And in the first of his beatitudes Jesus declared, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." As long as you think you've got moral treasure to offer God, your hands are full of worthless trash. But when you see it for the filth it is and drop it, then your hands are ready to receive like a beggar the treasure God wants to give you: the rich treasures of Jesus who lived a perfect life in your place, who offered that life on the cross as the sacrifice of atonement for sin – to pay the debt you owed – and who rose again to declare you righteous before God for his sake.

The true treasures of the kingdom are these: your baptism, by which God made you his child and heir; the word of absolution you heard at the beginning of this service in which through me God declared your sins forgiven; the body and blood of Christ given and shed for you that will shortly be offered from this altar. We come here as beggars and God through his Word and Spirit lavishes on us riches beyond our wildest imagination. Here is a true mountain of eternal wealth that can never spoil or fade. Sadly, it's a treasure that all too often we don't value as we should. And for that too we should seek forgiveness.

And there is yet more treasure to be found here, treasure of a more material nature that we usually don't see or appreciate as much as we should. It's as the disciples are digesting this strange new idea that wealth can be an obstacle to salvation that the gears in Peter's head start turning. He remembers that Jesus told the rich young man that if he gave away all his stuff and followed him, he'd have treasure in heaven. It occurs to Peter that he and the other disciples have done exactly that – which means they were going to qualify for heavenly treasures. Ooh! We'd like to hear more about that. What do we get? Let's find out. "See, Jesus, we have left everything and followed you."

I have no doubt that the disciples were hoping for a detailed description of the glories of the age to come and the kinds of treasures that would be theirs. Everyone wants to know what it's going to be like. The truth is that the Scriptures have very little to say about it. And in his reply, Jesus maintains this relative silence and doesn't shed much light on the subject. Instead, he points the disciples mostly to what they will gain in this life by following him. "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and the sake of the Gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life."

In other words, forget about the next age. It's enough for you to know that you'll live in paradise forever. Cherish and treasure what you're gaining now. You think you've sacrificed something by following me? Left your home and family behind? Nonsense. You have hundreds of homes and more family than you can shake a stick at ahead of you. What did Jesus mean? Speaking to the twelve, he meant the homes that would be opened to them wherever they went preaching the good news. In every city or town they went the believers would open their doors, take them in, and allow them to stay until they moved on to the next place. They had a house wherever they went. And family? Every man who came to faith through their message became a brother, every younger woman a sister; the older women became their mothers in the Lord. All together became the children of the same heavenly Father, which is why Jesus doesn't say anything about gaining fathers: we all only have one. Note also that Jesus doesn't mention anything about spouses. Why not? It's because the disciples, the ones who were married anyway, took their wives with them when they set out to share the good news. And they were only allowed one each. Well, what about the lands Jesus promised them? They got those too: vast fields ripe for harvest. The whole world became their mission field. And yes, as Jesus said, their work and their travels came with persecutions. He didn't say it would be easy. In this fallen world the work of the kingdom never is. It's a war, a battle for souls; and the enemy puts up a stiff fight. But he cannot win. The victory has already been won by Christ.

It's a victory we share by faith in Jesus. And because we do, we share also in the fellowship that is the family of God. This is our great material treasure in this age; not the wealth we own or the things we have, but the people sitting here in this sanctuary. Sure, we could extend it to all who are in Christ by faith the whole world over; but for the moment I want you to concentrate on this group. Take a look around. See the treasure of priceless value God has given us in each other. Called together in Christ and confessing his name we are one family. These are your brothers and sisters and mothers and children. God has given them to you and you to them to love and to serve and to care for.

I hasten to add that it's an eternal treasure. Think about it: the stuff you own, all the money you have, the property you possess, all the things you value now – you can't take any of it with you. It will all be lost in the age to come. But the relationship we have with each other as fellow members of Christ and the family of God will endure forever. What we will be doing for all

eternity is loving and taking care of each other. Your joy will be in serving the needs of all your family members. And to the extent that we do that now in this age here in this fellowship, we are bringing a bit of heaven to earth. My brothers and sisters in Christ: we're sitting on a treasure here. Do you truly appreciate its value?

Jesus did. He gave his life for it – for each and every one of us. Therefore let this be our prayer: that we would properly value both the vast wealth we have in Christ who gives himself to us through the ministry of his church, and the blessings he gives us in each other as members of his one family – for these are the true treasures of the kingdom. May God grant it to us for Jesus' sake. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***