

THE TREASURE SHELF

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Grace Church in New York
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“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Luke 12:34

When I moved in with my now wife Caitlin, it was a merging of aesthetic styles. Her style being clean and mine being ... cluttered. Messy. In fact, we took a relationship test as part of our preparation for marriage and the number one thing it told us to do was hire outside help for the cleaning, so that Caitlin would not live in constant resentment of me.

The real truth of it is that I have an attachment to stuff. I don't like to throw it away, because I don't like to be wasteful, and I also like how all my stuff reminds me of people and places.

So on the day of my move-in, I hung my curio shelf on the wall of our new bedroom -- the shelf my grandfather and my mother made together long before I was born -- and I started unpacking the box that would fill the shelf. “What's in that box?” Caitlin asked. And I swear, totally unfacetiously and unironically, I responded, “my treasures.”

I was really impressed with myself that I had whittled my treasures to one box. Caitlin, a bit less so, as I started unwrapping: a beeswax candle sculpture of the Venus of Willendorf, three cherubic faced porcelain choir boys in red robes and ruffs, a photograph of my great grandmother knitting, a tiny box with a skeleton on it and inside, a mustard seed I got in confirmation class 20 years ago. Two dolls in nun outfits with blinking eyes. A small china house from Williamsburg, VA.

And my favorite, 4 highball drinking glasses with colorful screenprints of vintage opera posters on them that were my grandmother's. See, they're beautiful, and they also remind me of her, and they're also a pun -- opera glasses, get it? Anyway, you get the idea. This is just a fraction of the stuff I had in that box -- not exactly the kind of stuff you see in catalogs or design stores or even antique shops, just some weird stuff I have accumulated along the way, that I love.

When we were packing up to move back in April, now happily married, 3 years of successful cohabitation under our belts, and as we were and are preparing to make room for a baby to join our family, I realized, I probably didn't need alllllll of this stuff, I probably didn't need a dedicated curio shelf, we could probably reappropriate the shelf for baby storage, and I could probably save the choir boys for Christmas only, and maybe burn the Venus of Willendorf candle, it is a candle after all -- and maybe even put the opera glasses in regular drinking rotation.

It made my stomach churn a bit to think of it, if we actually USE the opera glasses, they could break! And I would be so sad! But then again, what is the use of them collecting dust on a shelf? So as we unpacked, I cleaned them and put them on the shelf with all our regular cups.

It probably would make for a better sermon if one of them had broken since then, so that I could tell you it was all okay and using is the joy of the thing, anyway, and used things never last forever. But they're all four sitting tight in our cabinet, at least as of this morning. [knock wood] And we really do use them; I love drinking out of them each morning, and it's even Caitlin who is the one to remind me not to put them in the dishwasher so the pictures stay vivid.

I was thinking about all these treasures, the evolution and reappropriation of my treasures, as I read the Gospel this morning -- where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

I was thinking that putting my treasures on the wall for Caitlin to stare at every day for three years was a kind of metaphor for my heart -- saying to her, here is my weird and eclectic heart and I'm putting it here with you, in our new house. Here is where my treasure lies, with you.

And now it's all in use, it's part of the rhythm of our lives; that's what happens when you put your treasure where your heart is, your treasure is used, it's not buried or stored up, it's exercised, like a vital organ, pumping with life force.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Okay that's the five minute version of this sermon -- and even though I think it's a pretty good message for a Sunday morning in August when the world seems a little out of step with how beautiful the weather is,

I don't think God's good news for us this morning is quite as easy as this almost Hallmark-like greeting card sentiment. Because, did you hear the rest of the Gospel lesson today? It's actually kind of dark and twisted:

Jesus is talking to his disciples. He starts by saying, "Do not be afraid." Then he urges them not to worry about all their stuff, because the real thing that's important is God, being close to God, and bringing God's kingdom into existence, now.

But then he starts giving some examples about what this could look like:

First, he uses the image of a master rewarding his slaves for being always ready even in the middle of the night. Then he uses the image of a thief coming and robbing a master's house in the middle of the night. You must also be ready, he says.

Do not be afraid, Jesus starts. And then uses two pretty frightening examples, not to mention, kind of confusing ones.

What to do with a metaphor where Jesus is a slave master, rewarding slaves for being constantly alert and ready to go? It doesn't really sit right with me.

As I usually do when scripture is befuddling, which is not infrequent, I started doing some research on my favorite preaching websites.

These texts, of course, have been preached on for so many years, I'm never the first priest to try to tackle a tricky or confusing bit of scripture. So, I found a resource (that I will not name here) who suggested trading out the metaphor of a slave always being ready for their master for a more comfortable image for the congregation: how about the musician Dolly Parton, who says she always sleeps in her makeup, "You never know if you're going to wreck the bus, you never know if you're going to be somewhere in a hotel and there's going to be a fire. So I leave my makeup on at night and clean my face in the morning."

Ok, I love Dolly Parton, but this is not doing it for me! This is not a liberating image for me, as a woman, that God wants me to always have a full face of make-up on in case there's a fire.

For me, the way to understand the metaphor is through the next one that Jesus uses:

"But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

Who is God in this vignette? The owner or master? Or the thief? God is the thief! God is coming at an unexpected hour, Jesus says.

To me, it shows that Jesus uses images to try to help us understand God, that sometimes even contradict one another -- in these three paragraphs alone God goes from being a shepherd to a master to a thief -- because Jesus is showing us that God subverts our expectations. Just look at the continuation of the story of the slaves and the master; the master in this situation, seeing his slaves ready for action, serves them a meal instead of having them work. God subverts the expected master/slave relationship, and then one image later, actually steals from the master.

An important contextual point to always keep in mind when reading Jesus' words today is that he was talking to a people always under threat of the empire, the occupying government of their land who did not care about their well-being or humanity and who exploited them financially, through taxes and labor.

And so Jesus is always reassuring the people: this is not what God's kingdom looks like. God's kingdom is a radical subversion of this way of life, a redistribution that benefits everyone.

How do you and I hear a good word from this today? How do we answer the opening collect's prayer: Give us, Lord, the spirit to think and do always those things that are right. How do we know what is right, especially in our own different economic reality and context?

Because I'm not going to stand up here and tell you that the only way to be a Christian is to give away all your money. In New York City in 2019, that would be death-dealing; you wouldn't survive, and I promise God wants survival for you.

But I will tell you that I hear in this message God's desire for you to help bring about this new reality, the kingdom of heaven, here on earth now. Not by being prepared to do labor in a broken economy, not by wearing make-up at night, but by taking a true account of your treasures. Making sure that the things and people you value in this life are off the shelf and in use, pumping blood, not afraid of breaking. Imagine if everyone faced the world, each day, this way, powered by love, connected to our ancestors, and ready for use. God's kingdom, God's freedom from this way of life, would be much closer indeed. AMEN.

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