

Where our treasure, there our hearts

- In our short passage this morning from Jesus’s sermon on the mount, we hear Jesus talking to us about the treasures we seek and the focus of our hearts
 - Jesus warns us against the futile endeavors of amassing endless treasures on earth, and beckons us instead to “store up our treasures in heaven”
 - Jesus’s guidance here is part of a wide body of Jesus’s teachings about money, an area that Jesus focuses a lot of attention on—presumably because Jesus knows it’s an area where we need a whole lot of teaching and guidance!
 - Nearly half of Jesus’s parables concern themselves with our relationship with money and possessions
 - About 1 in 10 of all the verses in the four Gospels concern themselves with our relationship with money and possessions
 - Clearly this is a topic that matters a lot to Jesus, presumably because it matters a lot for our own lives, our spiritual lives, and our entering into that Kingdom of God that Jesus describes
- And throughout this week, money has been on my mind this week
 - I’ve been preparing for our District’s spring gathering which has drawn us together in the theme of the treasures of our heart
 - Friday evening and throughout the day yesterday, folks from across our Pacific Northwest District Church of the Brethren have gathered to not only build fellowship and worship and sing together, but also to explore together what our discipleship looks like when it comes to questions of finances, wealth, and money—what discipleship looks like

for us as individuals, and what it looks like for our collective church bodies and district faith community

- This past week has really emphasized just how much scripture has to say about our relationship with money
 - Jesus talks to us about money again and again throughout the gospels
 - The very first words of Jesus's public ministry as outlined in Luke 4 are a quotation from the Book of Isaiah speaking about the year of Jubilee, the year of the Lord, the year every 49 years when the wealth of the people sort of resets—property and lands that have been bought or sold over that period return to their prior owner; debts of money and debts of servitude are forgiven
 - Jubilee presents a sort of wiping the slate clean of communal money-based relationships—and it's where Jesus begins his teachings and ministry, by proclaiming that his arrival is akin to the arrival of Jubilee
- I've been thinking this week about how there's probably no other topic in the collection of Jesus's teachings that the Christian world as a whole so struggles to grapple with and even talk about
 - And perhaps some of that is the discomfort we feel in broaching a topic normally left outside of polite conversation—the old adage is it's not polite to talk about money, politics, or religion, and when it comes to what our religion teaches us about money, well that has us directly focusing on at least 2 of those 3
- Amidst all the scriptural focus on money and finances, I've found myself wondering, what exactly is it about money in particular that draws such attention?

- Not just *what* does Jesus teach us about money, but *why* are those teachings so important, *why* is money such a focus in Jesus's teaching
- Because in one sense, money would seem to just be one among many of our worldly preoccupations
 - If we consider what the common situation might have been to those Jesus was speaking to in the gospels stories, money would probably consist for most folks as physical treasures they would keep tucked away in their homes
 - Coins of stamped metals, maybe precious gemstones for those more wealthy, maybe particular valuable items that were kept not for the inherent qualities but simply for their being valuable—like how we might imagine someone would want to hold onto a bar of gold not because it's just such a pretty bar to display, but because it's gold! It's worth money
 - If we think of money as just being a particular category of stuff, amidst the stuff of our clothing, the stuff of our homes, the stuff of our kitchen supplies and furniture and livestock and on and on—well, why would money in particular draw such importance?
 - And indeed, in the modern world, it would seem if anything even further removed from central prominence in our lives
 - So much of money today isn't just the stamped coins and precious metals in a tucked-away corner of the house—a whole lot of money today is just the numbers in bank records
 - In terms of its material reality, money would seem if anything further removed from our everyday lives
- So what is it, really, about money?

- Why was it so important for Jesus to talk about two thousand years ago?
- And why is it still such a salient issue for us today?
- One perspective that's been on my mind is how issues of money, wealth, and finances so often comes down to control—the ways that we seek so desperately to be in control, and the ways that we're called instead to give everything over to God
 - If I consider what it means for me to have money or not have money, I think it really comes down to how I can control (or at least try to control!) the circumstances around me
 - With money, I can tell Amazon what goods and products I would like to appear at my doorstep, and lo and behold, so it happens
 - With money, I can look at a nice house on a nice piece of land and say, you know what, I want to be the one in control of that, I want to fill it with my stuff, I want to live there, and I want to be able to say no one else can live there because it's mine and I control it—and lo and behold, money lets me make that happen
 - With money, I can say that I want people to come and work in the gardens of that property I've bought, I can say I want certain plants to be there and others not to be there, I want it to look such-and-such a way—and again, lo and behold, with money I can make it happen
 - Money is a way that we can exert control on our circumstances and exert control on the people and world around us
 - And I think we feel that on the flip-side as well
 - When money is lacking, it can have us feel like we're not in control of our lives

- When money runs dry, we can start to lose control of what products arrive at our doorsteps, we can start to lose control of what foods we fill our kitchen cupboards and fridges with, we can start to lose control of where we live
- When our indebtedness runs high, we feel like we're losing control
- Money both feeds and is fed by our desire to be in control
 - The more money we have, the more we can feel like we're in control—and the more we tend to desire a sense of even greater control
 - And so much of our faith, so much of our relationship with the divine, is about control too
 - When we're trying to wrestle control of our lives, when we're trying to be in control of the people around us and in control of what will happen to us—we kind of start to push God out of the picture
 - When our relationship with the people and situations around us is focused on how we can control it all, it can't really be focused on love too
- And the control we grasp at as we grasp at money, we never quite get enough control, do we?
 - No matter how much money we amass, we never quite can control enough to satiate those cravings for it
 - We can never spend and invest our way to filling the space of empty longing in our hearts
 - We can never spend and invest our way out of the grief of losing a beloved friend or family member; we could never spend and invest our way into deep human connection; we could never spend and invest our way to worldly immortality

- We can't even be in control of our money itself if we're honest—like Jesus says in this morning's passage, moths and rust will nibble away and destroy so many of our treasures, and what moths and rust can't get to thieves can break in and snatch
- So what might it mean, then, for us to store up treasures not on earth but in heaven?
 - Well, perhaps part of it is giving up our desperate striving for control; perhaps part of it is giving control of our lives back over to God
 - Recognizing that our control over our own lives is only ever a fleeting and fading illusion at best
 - Recognizing that even when we try to grasp harder and harder at control over every aspect of our lives, it's like trying to grasp at handfuls of sand—no matter how hard we squeeze, it slips away between our fingers
 - When we let go of control and give it all back to God, we honor the fact that ultimately we depend on God for all that we have and all that we are; that everything in our lives is a blessing given to us from God
 - And as we joyfully surrender control to God, we're also choosing to give ourselves into God's direction and guidance as well
 - When we hand Christ the reins of our lives, when we let Jesus take the wheel, we're opening ourselves up to be steered by the divine
 - Like the first disciples Jesus called, we let go of everything to follow Jesus, walk with Jesus, live as Jesus calls us to
 - In this morning's passage, Jesus tells us that wherever our treasure is, there our heart will be also
 - Whatever it is that we treasure, that is where our heart will pull us

- What we treasure, we seek
- So, is our heart pulling towards worldly treasures? Towards control over the world around us? Control over the people around us and the situations we're in?
 - Or is our heart pulling us towards heavenly treasures, towards Christ, towards loving focus not on our own control but our love for others, towards all-giving generosity?
- Where will we look to find our treasures?
- Friends, let us pray together
 - Let us pray, O God, that you open hearts to joyful surrender
 - God, it is so easy for us to crave control
 - So easy for us to seek money with all of our hearts; to let the pull of money steer our lives
 - But God, help us to loosen the grip that money has on us
 - Help us to let go of that futile quest for ever-greater control and power
 - Help us to give ourselves into your care and direction, giving you the reins of our lives so that we might live as you call us to
 - God, help us to treasure not our own materials goods but our relationship with you
 - Help us to treasure not the money in our pockets or the numbers in our bank accounts, but instead let us treasure the love that we share, let us treasure the ways that we serve one another, let us treasure your divine presence in our lives
 - Help us to treasure you, O God, that our hearts might be found in you—amen.