

“You’re kidding, Jesus, right?”

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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Some years ago a cluster of my clergy colleagues in the Bronx got together to discuss how they could inspire their churches to pay their full apportionments. “Apportionments” are our financial commitments as a United Methodist church that supports mission and ministry beyond our local church, something that (I’m proud to say) Mary Taylor Memorial Church has always paid in full.

This group of clergy decided to designate their local church pledges for apportionments only. The pros and cons of that particular strategy are not the point of this story. What is the point is that they sought, and received, some noteworthy publicity in our regional Conference newspaper. Commenting on the theological rationale for this particular strategy, one clergy person was quoted, “*After all, Jesus told us ‘Where your heart is, there your treasure will be also.’*”

No! The teaching of Jesus in today’s Gospel is so counter-intuitive that this clergyman, whom one might have expected to quote scripture correctly, couldn’t get it right. “*Where your treasure is there your heart will be also*” is the sequence Jesus gave. This goes completely against the grain, doesn’t it, this teaching of Jesus (Luke 12:33-34) of selling our possessions, giving alms (gifts to the needy), making purses that don’t wear out and admitting that our hearts are where our treasure is?

Since we invited a number of our young people here today to recognize their graduations, I thought about this passage from the perspective of a young person starting their career and what popped into my mind was “You’re kidding, Jesus, right?” I mean, come on! Don’t you know that we’re starting out and the whole point is to acquire some financial stability? Heck, some of us, considerably older, have adult children on our health insurance.

This thought led me to realize this passage is for me, too, as I watch the stock market and consider its impact on my retirement fund which, like many corporations, was transferred from a “guaranteed benefit” to a “guaranteed contribution” fund some time ago. Where my treasure is there will my heart be also. Ouch!

Annie Dillard in her book Teaching a Stone to Talk, commented more broadly on the counter-cultural aspect of Christianity:

“Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?...It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats...to church: we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return.”

Now some of this notion of the counter-cultural nature of Christianity we do know. In recent years we have taken a progressive stance welcoming all people regardless of sexual orientation, garnering criticism both within and outside of the congregation. But, as I learned this week, this is not new for us. I was working with Tom Griggs and Flo Berrien on some church historical materials to find a brief history for use by our Long Range Planning Committee. In the process, I found a citation that the Rev. Lloyd Worley, D.D., pastor of this church from 1962 – Nov. 1, 1965 was accused by an outside group, because of progressive theology, of being a Communist: the evidence cited being our red church doors!

“You’re kidding, Jesus, right?” I mean, life is tough enough and we’ve got financial worries and children to raise and a boss to deal with and family issues. I come to church for comfort, for your good words on being our Good Shepherd and leading me beside still waters and providing a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. Sell all our stuff and be alert because we don’t know when you are coming? Seriously?

Well, seriously, yes; though not literally. As I said last week, Christianity does not require a vow of poverty and, like most preachers, Jesus will sometimes use hyperbole to make his point. Context is everything to understand these words of Jesus today. First, the passage immediately preceding this one is teaching about not worrying, with its familiar passages “Consider the lilies of the field...” and “Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God.” What do many of us worry most about? Possessions and finances. So don’t, Jesus says. Focus instead on things of God’s kingdom.

Second, Jesus comes out of the prophetic as well as the pastoral tradition of Judaism. Remember the text he cited to begin his ministry? Isaiah 61:1 “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.*” He reminds us of a higher calling and the weightier matters of justice. Today’s passage from the same prophet, Isaiah, is a rebuke from a prophet of the king’s court to the power of the king and clergy. Gulp! Both sacred and secular festivals are a stench in God’s nostrils. “*I have had enough...*” God says in 1:11. Instead, “*seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.*” (vs. 17). Although this part of our tradition may make us uncomfortable—I surely fall short of its demands—it is as vital a part of our faith as pastoral care.

Last, we can live in this tension because our ultimate citizenship is not here! This is the promise of today’s reading from Hebrews. It starts with that famous and wonderful definition of faith: “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” (11:1) It goes on to remind us of our forebear Abraham, who followed the urging of God, lived in a foreign land, was given the power of procreation although by nature he was too old, and descendants emerged “*as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.*” (11:12) When our treasure is committed to faith and to building the home that is “*eternal in the heavens*” (II Cor. 5:1), Jesus’ exhortation doesn’t seem to be kidding at all. In fact, it seems to release us from the worry of things and the joy of lifting our neighbor and knowing that we, too, will be lifted from our struggle when we need it most.

How, pastor, how? Some of the ways are obvious and within reach of some of our physical and financial abilities: UMARMY, Haiti, Habitat for Humanity. For others, service takes the form of volunteering closer to home at Beth-El Center or Christian Community Action or the 4th Thursday Community Supper here or the bi-monthly Wednesday Community Supper in Bridgeport. For still others the commitment to reach for justice comes in financially supporting these efforts; donating a Mission Cross for our weekly altar; or supporting the multiple initiatives of our Missions Committee and Methodist Youth Fellowship and Confirmation Class, all of which make mission commitments. As I did earlier this morning, I invite those able to consider traveling with several of us to Washington on August 24th for the 50th Anniversary observance of the March on Washington.

Yet it also occurs to me that there are less-churchy and arguably less-visible but equally “hands on” ways to prepare for Christ and for the life to come. I think of the several families in our congregation as well as those I’ve known over the years who have adopted children; and what a significant effort of love and energy that is. I think of people who work with children both professionally and as volunteers, especially through programs like Big Brother/Big Sister, Scouting and Literacy Volunteers. I think of the many here committed to curing cancer through walks, swims and bikes; and those who take on raising funds for other illnesses in the same manner. I believe that, whatever the individual motivation, God is also at work in these commitments and uses them to bring in the kingdom and prepare us for heaven.

Jesus is not kidding. Worry and naval-gazing is not the answer. When we reach beyond ourselves with our treasure—whether money time or talent—we reflect the priorities of our heart. So look at your treasure as I look at mine, that we might not be afraid; receive the gift of the kingdom that we cannot help but pass on. Buckle your seat belts and let’s go!