

Lent Midweek Service (Week One) 2023

MATTHEW 6:19-21

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is there your heart will be also.”

This week in our “Where Your Heart Is” devotional we find a story about a young person who has their car stolen. There are a few of us here at Gethsemane who can relate to having their car stolen. It is an unfortunate fact that car theft stats are up across the country. We could debate the ‘whys’ on car theft, or the many things that may cause a person to do so. We could even debate car theft laws and the ability, or inability, of those laws to make any lasting changes to car theft rates. I wonder though; if we ask ourselves what would be most upsetting about a stolen car - what would our answer be?

Is it the act of stealing that gets us most upset?

Is it the vulnerability we feel when we are harmed?

Is it the car itself being taken?

Or, would we answer much like the person telling this story? Is it our personal stuff - stuff that can't be replaced - sentimental items attached to us by emotion and memory?

George Carlin had a skit about stuff. We've always got our stuff - if we get too much stuff we rent a space to store more stuff. When we go on vacation we bring our stuff. We buy more stuff. We gift stuff. So much stuff. What is it about ‘stuff’ that causes us to feel like we need more of it?

The Bible is full of words calling on us to give up our stuff to follow Jesus. In Matthew 19:21 we read Jesus tell a young man that in order to be complete he must sell all of his “stuff” and give to the poor. Jesus says in doing so he will find treasure in heaven - and then invites him to “come, follow me”.

Living in Portland, I've had my fair share of car break-ins, a broken window, and people taking mail or using our water faucet. My heart always says to me “they must have needed something more.” Who am I to judge this person whose behavior is not something I agree with and who feels desperate enough to risk judgment? Verse four of a mighty fortress reads “That Word (Jesus) above all earthly powers no thanks to them abideth; the Spirit and the gifts are ours through him who with us sideth (Jesus again). Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; the body they may kill: God's truth abideth still; his kingdom is forever!” If we, as good Lutherans, listen to the words of the Bible and those of Martin Luther we find over and over again that no matter what happens to our earthly possessions, we will find our real treasure in heaven where it is promised. Yet, we have a hard time letting go of ‘stuff’. Especially if it isn't letting go of our own doing.

Recently, as you may all already know; our church building was broken into and stuff was taken. Checks, debit cards, the change for good jar, Quarterback Sunday money...

What we can hope is that whomever was responsible used that stuff in ways that were genuinely helpful to their situation. Food, shelter, gas, heat...things we would have used our "Open Hands" fund for. The question each of us must ask ourselves is; "Where was our heart when we heard about the break-in?" Was it quick to judge the person committing the act of stealing? Is your heart activated in fear and vulnerability at the thought of such a violation? Does your heart ache with the thought of what was taken? Or does your heart break for the sentiments a safe, secure, theft-free church building provides?

If we pause and consider sentiments and the feelings we associate with 'stuff' we find most often that these feelings are exactly those Jesus urged us to lean into. Love. Praying for an enemy. Doing for neighbor. We don't often place 'stuff' in our life to remind us not to forgive or to mistreat others. We collect stuff that makes us feel good and remember good things.

I'm going to ask you to turn to your neighbor - move around, find a buddy - and wonder together about the first question in your devotional; "How do you understand the connection between your treasure and your heart?" We'll take four minutes - if you don't already know each other take a moment to introduce yourself and where you're coming from today and then spend a minute or so each answering the question.

As we prepare to leave today; I would like to leave you with a passage from Luke (chapter 12, verse 23). "For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing." As we depart and return to our lives of TV news, social media, and headlines sent to our emails I encourage you all to consider that life is more than food, TVs, cars or jewelry. Our bodies are more than the costumes and decorations we wear or the physical pieces we carry around day to day. Life is about more than stuff that can be purchased - and taken from us. And to be Christ-like, we must be willing to sacrifice all of our earthly belongings to find our real treasure in heaven.

Amen.