

**Treasure In Heaven** – Stewardship week 1 – October 18, 2015

**SCRIPTURE:** Mark 10:17-31 (21)

**Hymns:** 1) #12 “I Sing the Mighty Power of God 2) #448 “Take My Life, God, Let it Be” 3) #181  
“You Are Salt for the Earth, O People”

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

Leader: O God, we seek to love and serve you,

People: But sometimes your way is hard for us.

L: O God, we seek to love and serve you,

P: But sometimes we fear the cost.

L: O God, we seek to love and serve you,

P: Help us to store up treasure in heaven, as we care for your people here on earth.

**INVOCATION AND LORD’S PRAYER**

O God, we know your commandments. We hear the teachings about your kingdom. But our hearts grow weak, and we fear for our own security as we seek to follow Jesus. Strengthen our resolve and fix our vision on your ways, so that we may serve you courageously and fully. We pray this in Jesus’ name: “Our Father...”

**SERMON**

How about that Michigan VS Michigan State game! This past Friday and Saturday, I was at Plymouth Congregational Church in E. Lansing for Michigan Conference, and yesterday, getting

ready for the big game, I wore my maize and blue. Someone asked me why are you for UM? Because I am a graduate of that school, it is my Alma Mater. It got me thinking though - **the real alma mater, the real mother of my soul, is not my school, it's the community that nurtures me and where I can nurture others as we seek to serve the Father of us all— my real alma mater, the mother of my soul, is the church.** It's a community and a set of relationships that are sometimes really wonderful and sometimes rocky. Sometimes we just NAIL IT, and sometimes we as individuals and a community struggle.

Today's passage discloses a place of frequent struggle for God's people. It's the story of Jesus' encounter with a rich young man. He came in confidence and went away sad, because he was told that he was very near God's kingdom and all that was left before he entered the kingdom was for him to get rid of his wealth and give it to the poor. This is a really hard teaching! It was for the young man. It is for us. But it's also got some complexity, it's about money and so much more.... so let's look.

There's a story—I don't know how true it really is-- that **monkeys can be caught** by putting out a large heavy jar with an opening just big enough for the monkey's hand, a jar filled up with monkey treats. When the monkey goes in, and grabs a handful, there's not enough room for the fist of goodies to be removed. And the story is, the monkey is so greedy for the treats, that even when its captor approaches, it will not open the hand, leave the treats, and get away. **Its desire to have and hold onto what it feels it has, leads to the end of its freedom.**

I think this is the kind of thing that Jesus was saying to the rich man, to his followers and hearers, to us. Don't hoard. **Don't clutch to things of this world. It will stand in the way of your true freedom.**

So, is Jesus against resources? Is money somehow evil? Is nobody allowed to be rich, and is everyone supposed to be poor and starving? Of course not. The high value that Jesus put on sharing with children, with the needy, offering hospitality, implies that people have something to offer. The proverbial saying is not that money is evil: it is the love of money that draws people away from goodness. **We are called to share what we have, and to value people over things. We are called by Jesus to put our faith in God, not in the things that give us a false sense of security.** We are called to open our hands, to let go of the things that hold us back, to let go of what keeps us from fully committing to doing God's work of love and care, justice and mercy, in this world.

Instead of piling up treasure on earth, Jesus told the rich young man, store up the treasure in heaven. Now doing that is not as though we are filling up a heavenly bank account that will save us.... because that is a kind of hoarding too, isn't it? Instead, **building up treasure in heaven means making the first priority our work alongside God, through the power of the spirit, with**

**the guidance of Jesus, work that serves to advance God's righteous realm.** If you put your trust in any THING— any kind of earthly treasure such as money, status, certain possessions, your trust will eventually be betrayed, because those things do not last. And they cannot bring peace to our souls.

At the Michigan conference meeting we had several interesting presentations and a discussion time on what it is for Congregationalists to be united by covenant, to be God's covenant people. We heard a reflection by one minister on how we are like **monster cookies**: united but not so blended that the different individual parts are lost in the final result. We heard a reflection on how even when we are running away and getting lost and alienating ourselves, **we are always hoping that God—and God's goodness and love—can find us.** And we heard from the pastor of a very small church, a building that's hard to find even in a tiny community, a congregation where on their big Sundays, Christmas and Easter, they get as many as 30 people. When she was called to that church the people were feeling defeated, like maybe it was all over for the. But now **they have begun to find that they are gifted.** That they may be few but they can take action for God's purposes. That although they may be paying their bills out of what lands in the offering plate on Sunday morning, they can share. Driving home, our delegate and I said to each other, wow, North Church is so rich in so many ways, and hearing the story of this other church made us even more aware of what we have and are able to share and put out into the world. We have a great building and dedicated people and funds—and the spirit and the conviction-- to really do God's work.

A few minutes ago we heard about this year's stewardship emphasis: **following Jesus, pledging ourselves to share what we have AND ALSO share what we are with our world.** We have signposts all over the building pointing to the many different missions we undertake—local and national and international. Emergency aid. Things we do in this building and places we go out to. Every post has many different things on it...and there are four of them. Even that collection of missions and ministries represents a fraction of what we do. It's an important reminder that what we put in is going out into the world as it is intended to. And it's also at work in a building we can share with the community, where we set up and undertake ministries. And it's at work in a people who are learning to live together, to contain differences, to be kind and collaborative and to work effectively together. **We are seeking to follow Jesus, as Jesus has called us, to make the work of the kingdom our priority ahead of everything else, trusting that God will guide us and care for us.**

Or to put all of the ideas I've expressed in this sermon into in one very simple statement: **Jesus calls us, in all things—in everything—to take the generous view,** because that is the way God views all his children: with generosity and love. To be generous with our resources, not hoarding them. To be generous in our hospitality, our caring. To be generous and not withhold

in judgment. To model generosity of resources and spirit so that the world can see the blessing that comes when people experience act in the radical generosity of God.

So we shouldn't be like the monkey, who lets the desire to have and hold onto something take away its freedom. **We need instead to be the church: like salt, like light, adding to the whole.** We need to be trusting in God, following Jesus, dedicated to the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God. In the process, we will see that what we have is truly enough for God to bring the result, working with us, and through us. We can be the Body of Christ at work in the world. We can be dedicated to care not just for bodies but also for souls: living and acting in ways that open up the world to God's redemptive love. **We can – we must-- take the generous view as we go out into the world, as we serve with one another, and we seek to understand ourselves and others as God's beloved children.** If we truly do this work of generosity, then the church can be the true alma mater, the mother of the soul, a generous community inviting our world into loving relationship with God and others, following Jesus every step of the way.