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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
July 16, 2023, The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Isaiah 55:10-13, Psalm 65:9-14, Romans 8:1-11, Matthew 6:19-24

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

This is the third sermon in our series on the Sermon on the Mount. I want to begin with a story. But first, let me tell you that my main text that for this sermon is this one saying of Jesus from our reading:

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

So, here is my story. One day last week I was on the subway coming back from the Bronx. The train was a bit crowded, and I was standing and holding onto a pole at one end of the car. A petite young woman selling candy was making her way through the crowded car towards me. She stopped by me and took hold of the pole too. This woman was a young mother. She had a small infant wrapped up in a cloth and strapped on her back. No one had bought candy from her or paid any attention to her. Then I noticed an elderly woman sitting a few feet away looking rather intently at this young woman. The old woman had a rosary in her hand which she was fingering, no doubt a devout Catholic. When the young woman looked her way, she beckoned her over and handed her a dollar bill but took no candy. After the elderly woman gave her money, another woman nearby pulled out a dollar and gave it to her, and then another, and another. Only one of them took candy from her box. I found myself also moved to give her money when she returned to our pole.

I noticed that the old woman with the rosary kept staring at this young mother. Soon she caught her eye again and beckoned her back. This time she handed her a five-dollar bill and took two dollars back. So, it was pretty clear that this elderly woman did not have a lot of money. She was careful with what she had. A few moments later, she beckoned her back once more and gave her those two dollars back again. As she returned to where I was standing, I smiled at her and asked her where she was from. "España," she said and smiled. By then we had reached the station and she got off the train.

That morning I had read Psalm 41 which begins with these words:

Happy are they who consider the poor and needy!

Afterwards, I found myself reflecting on Jesus's words from today's portion of the Sermon on the Mount:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay 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 will your heart be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

In the long tradition of the church, the primary way to lay up treasure in heaven is to give alms. Sharing one's wealth with those who are in need is a high priority in the eyes of our Lord. Indeed, whenever God was angry with His people, it was often because of neglect of the poor. In their idolatry they were neglecting the poor, especially widows and orphans, the most vulnerable people in that ancient world. For example, we hear the words of the prophet Isaiah expressing the Lord's complaint about Jerusalem:

Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves.
Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts.
They do not defend the orphan,
and the widow's cause does not come before them. (Isaiah 1:21-23)

Let me now turn to my main text that for this sermon. Jesus said:

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

So, let me ask you, "Where is your heart?" That is a question for all of us to ponder. What is your greatest treasure? What is the pearl of great price that motivates you to go out and sell everything you have so that you can buy it? Listen to what Martin Luther has to say about this:

As the common saying has it, "What is dear to a man, that is his god." It is to this that his heart draws him; he thinks about it day and night; he goes to sleep with it, and he wakes up with it, whether it is money or property, pleasure, or fame. So, take a look at your own heart, and you will soon find out what has stuck to it and where your treasure is. It is easy to determine whether hearing the Word of God, living according to it, and achieving such a life gives you as much enjoyment and calls forth as much diligence from you as does accumulating and saving money and property.

The thing is, our Lord Jesus wants our hearts! Remember the first commandment? You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, your mind, and your strength. We all know this! And the second is well known too: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. That's what Jesus is on about in the Sermon on the Mount. He has come announcing the Kingdom of Heaven – His kingdom, His reign has begun! Well, this is what it means to be part of that kingdom! It means that our whole hearts are to be devoted to the Lord our God, and to Jesus Christ His Son. It means that we put God first before everything else – everything.

We may think that if we dedicate Sunday morning to God, well we've fulfilled our obligation for this week. And then we go back to our day-to-day lives in which our hearts are devoted elsewhere. Perhaps to our jobs, to our families, to our projects or ambitions, to our investments, to our health, or whatever it may be.

It's not that those things are not important. It's not that God doesn't want us to care about those things. It's a matter of where our hearts are; what they cling to. It is a matter of our choice when push comes to shove, when we must make a choice between following Jesus or pursuing other good things.

As we heard last Sunday, Jesus wants us to strive for purity of heart. Pastor Lara spoke about our deeds and motives being pure. We are to strive for righteousness in all that we do **and** in our reasons for doing it. In today's reading, Jesus urges us to love and serve God with our whole hearts, for, as he also says, "You cannot serve God and wealth/mammon." That is, we cannot give our ultimate loyalty to both God *and* our desire for security in material things.

In addition, when Jesus talks about storing up treasure in heaven, he doesn't mean that we are to only focus on what we might call "eternal rewards" as if this life here and now is something merely to be endured or tolerated, enjoyed, or suffered as it may be. Our Lord has brought us into this world, put us on this earth, and provided us with many gifts so that we might enjoy the life he has given us. But our enjoyment of this life should never be at the expense of others. If our hearts are devoted to our Lord, and Him alone, that devotion should affect everything else that we do, everything that we have or want, and other people as well.

This is where, unfortunately, things can get very complicated as we try to negotiate our own needs, the needs of our families, and the needs of the rest of the world. A million questions come to my mind! Should we buy things that are made in faraway countries by those who are not paid a living wage for

their labors? How should we invest our money? How much should we give to the church and to charity? Which charities? Should I give money to the homeless guy on the street corner even though I can see that he's on drugs? What do I really need? How can I use the gifts I have to serve my Lord and care for others?

My point is that wholehearted devotion to Jesus will influence our lives and the world. It should guide us in the choices we make and how we treat others. It ought to make us benevolent towards those in need. It ought to make us more thoughtful about how we spend our money and what material possessions we really need. If our sense of security truly rests in the loving and generous providence of God, perhaps we too can be more loving and generous toward others – and less anxious about ourselves. You will hear more about that next Sunday!

If I am wholeheartedly devoted to Jesus, I would pray to him about every decision I make. I would consider his opinion on every matter. I would think about Jesus day and night and consider how I might be faithful to him in every circumstance. You see, it's a matter of one's orientation. We can be oriented towards God or towards some other source of hope and security – that usually turns out to be wealth in some shape or form, which is why Jesus says one cannot serve both God and mammon.

Let me give you an example of an organization that seems devoted wholeheartedly to God rather than to mammon. In working with the NALC missions, I have learned about an organization called Bethany International. It has been around for over 75 years now and I am pleased to say that it is one of our NALC Partner Agencies. Bethany exists to spread the gospel among those who have never heard the Good News about Jesus Christ our Lord.

I'm especially interested in how this organization got started. In 1945, five families from a Lutheran Church in Minnesota, heard our Lord's great commission and took it to heart. They felt called and inspired to train and send 100 missionaries around the world to bring people to Jesus. These five families sold their homes and combined their resources. They bought a large home in Minneapolis where they could all live together. They called it Bethany House because Bethany was a place of rest for Jesus and his disciples. They lived together in community to reduce their expenses and allow more resources to be used for training missionaries.

In 1946 the families outgrew the house, and they bought a large farm property in Bloomington, Minnesota. That farm is now the location of Bethany Global University where students learn how to carry out God's

mission and be a light for Christ in their field of study. Bethany now has over 100 missionaries serving in more than 20 countries around the world. They also partner with over 200 agencies worldwide to train disciples who are going out to make more disciples in places where people have little or no access to the gospel.

I am grateful that one of Bethany International's missionaries is a Global Worker supported by the North American Lutheran Church. Jonathan Gowin and his family have been serving in the Gambia, West Africa, for about 10 years. He has been working in agriculture there, but he also has a theological education and is to be ordained this August at our NALC Convocation in Oklahoma City.

Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. When we put God first in our lives and give our whole heart to Jesus, amazing things can happen! You can find many more examples of those who gave their whole hearts to Jesus, for there are many such saints throughout the history of the church.

That is not to say, however, that this is an easy thing to do! Many have suffered martyrdom for Jesus. Even now many suffer persecution or oppression for their devotion to Christ. Besides that, the many pressures of life make us anxious and cause us build up treasures here "on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal." Next Sunday we will hear Jesus tell us that we need not worry for our Father in heaven promises to take care of us.

For now, let us heed our Lord's words and store up treasures in heaven as we give our hearts to Jesus to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen