

“A Gift to Treasure”

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis

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Luke 13

We’re in the final Sunday of our series on Money and our Spirits, and it seems like this Gospel text couldn’t be better for bringing it all home for a stunning conclusion—at least that’s what I’m hoping for.

The most obvious image is treasure. We use the word “treasure” much more often as a verb than as a noun. Like I really treasured the time I had yesterday with extended family I hadn’t seen in a long time. Treasuring is about valuing something but it seems a little more intense than just thinking something is worthwhile. When you treasure something it is next level—it’s special and there is something about it that you hold on to or that you want to hold on to.

That’s how we use the word treasure as adults. But I’ve been reminded through Sarah how that word, “treasure”, is usually a noun for kids. Sarah doesn’t talk about treasuring something. She talks about *finding* treasure.

Treasure is something that makes your whole face light up with excitement. Sarah finds a lot of treasure—and she’s been that way ever since she could walk. She’d be toddling down the sidewalk and see a rock that glistened in the grass, and she run over and pick it up with a huge smile on her face.

So, I want to hold on to that image of treasure—as something that brings us the kind of joy that floods your whole being.

And now, I want to go back to the first words in the Gospel reading—words that Jesus is speaking to people who are trying to learn from him—words that he is speaking to us. He says: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

Everything that Jesus says after this has to do with not being afraid and being given an enormous treasure called the kingdom of God. I kinda feel like it’s easy to forget that when Jesus starts talking about selling our possessions and making some heavenly purses. That can make us feel less secure and more afraid. It sure sounds like things are being taken away from us—*not given to us*.

For Jesus, the kingdom of God is the most precious treasure there is—it’s at the heart of everything he says. Announcing the good news that the kingdom of God is here—that it’s happening now—that God is already giving it to us—is the core message Jesus came to preach and teach and illustrate with his life.

The kingdom of God is a very churchy term that also sounds a little bit like a fairy tale. And the problem with that is that it doesn’t sound real. The kingdom of God is hard to precisely define—that’s why Jesus used so many similes, metaphors and stories to describe it. “The kingdom of God is *like...*” That’s the way Jesus talked about it.

My very imperfect description is that the kingdom of God is whenever and wherever God’s purposes and ways are carried out. These are always things that lead to healing and wholeness—not just of people but of the whole creation—the whole planet. The kingdom of God is being given to us anytime there is more life and more love.

The kingdom of God can be given to us in the most unexpected ways—and this week I saw it be given through our Churchwide Assembly which was in Milwaukee. Our national church, the ELCA—the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—voted overwhelmingly to become the first Sanctuary denomination. What that means in practice remains to be seen but it was a bold and broad statement that we will stand with and advocate for refugees and immigrants.

And it came the same day as massive raids on poultry processing plants in Mississippi where ICE agents rounded up over 600 people. Once again, there were the terrible consequences of separating children from their parents—never mind the disruption and upheaval of whole communities.

The timing of our ELCA declaration of sanctuary on the same day as the raids was—to my way of seeing—God-given. This was *God* giving the kingdom. And even National Public Radio picked it up. It was the lead news story on Thursday morning, with our Presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, speaking. On Wednesday, she had led a march from the Assembly to the ICE offices in Milwaukee. As the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we got a chance to give “evangelical” its true meaning, which is “good news”.

It was indeed God’s good pleasure to give us the kingdom. That’s the treasure being given to us—even this week.

Maybe it’s better to say, *especially* this week.

When Jesus says, “Don’t be afraid,” he gives a reason why we shouldn’t be afraid. And that reason is that God wants to and *is* giving us the kingdom. *This* is the antidote to our anxiety and our fear. *This* is where Jesus is urging us to invest our efforts, our time and our money.

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

Like everything else that Jesus does, he turns our conventional way of looking at giving upside down. We tend to hear these words of Jesus in the reverse order. We hear it as where your heart is, there your treasure will be, too. You put your money, your time, your energy into the things you really value. That’s definitely true for me and pretty much everyone I know.

But Jesus says it the other way around: Put your treasure where you want your heart to be.

I’m going to give it to Jesus—he knows how to challenge us.

When Jesus talks about the heart, it’s a bit different than our understanding. In his time, the heart symbolized a person’s will and way of thinking—like mindset and driving life force all rolled into one.

So for all of us whose wills and ways of thinking are not aligned with God’s, Jesus offers us a training program. Just start putting your treasure in places that line up with God’s kingdom of life and justice and wholeness for all. Invest your money, your time, your energy there—and watch what happens to your heart. It’s Jesus’ cardio workout program.

I know this training program works.

Over the last five years, Paul and I have put large amounts of time, energy and now money, into trying to meet the special education needs of our daughter, Sarah. Even though my mother was a special education teacher, I really knew very little about this world of learning differences and special education. I would never claim to be an expert now but I do know a lot more than I did 5 years ago.

We have been fighting hard for Sarah's educational needs and—with help—we got her to a private school where she has made huge progress. As many of you know, we have been fighting a legal battle to get public funding for her education. A week ago Monday, we had a breakthrough that we did not in a 100 million years see coming. We were not in a legal proceeding. We were in a meeting with school officials about her education plan for this coming school year. This was a necessary step on a path toward another legal proceeding. We did not expect *anything* meaningful for Sarah and her education to come out of this meeting.

But I'm going to say that God gave us a slice of the kingdom, because the public school officials proposed what we have been fighting for all along—a full-time placement in special education at the school of our choosing. We won a bigger victory than we *ever* could have won in court. And it's something that *almost never happens*.

Sarah getting what she needs to learn is clearly what God wills for this world. But what God wills for this world is certainly not limited to the amazing gift that we have received. Over these years of struggle, I said to myself that if we ever got Sarah's educational needs settled, I would do something to take on the system. We know that, with the right educational resources, kids with learning differences can learn. Getting those resources shouldn't depend on having a house you can put a second mortgage on.

We have a couple more steps to secure Sarah's situation but after we do, I'm going to do something for other kids who have the same needs—because Jesus's heart training program really works. Putting our treasure into special education has changed my heart—in the sense of changing the way I think and the actions I want to take. And it's changed it in a way that brings my life and my actions more into line with God's purposes for this world—God's kingdom.

So, even though it sounds like Jesus got the word order wrong, his way actually works. If we put our treasure in places that make God's desire for the fullness of life, real right now, our hearts will follow. This is not a call to a diminished life. It's actually a call away from a life that is restricted by fear toward a life that is full of the treasure of the kingdom.

In the beginning, I talked about Sarah finding treasure everywhere. She still does. She sees things that most people—including me—completely miss, and she is flooded with joy at every turn.

That's what Jesus's heart training program does. Because the kingdom of God is on our minds and hearts, we see it everywhere. We see how much and how constantly God is giving—and we are flooded with joy.

What a way to live!

Thanks be to God. Amen.