

Majoring in the Major

Psalm 128
Matthew 6:19-21

If Social Security is the “third rail” of politics, then politics themselves are the third rail of preaching. But I am about to touch it. I am about to talk about the presidential election. At breakfast Wednesday I told Linda that no matter what had happened overnight, I knew I would wake up unhappy. Frankly, I found both candidates unacceptable. When I think about the candidates we have been forced to choose between in recent years I get angry. Sure enough, I awakened in a surly mood. I barely had two words to say as we walked the dogs. When I got to church I checked the news and learned that the counting for the only races I felt motivated to follow—here in Vigo County—had not started in earnest. Perfect. Just perfect.

Then I read Psalm 128. And it blanketed me in the warmth of the rising sun on a perfect June day. Psalm 128 paints a lovely, optimistic picture of how the Lord rewards those who “walk in his ways”. Psalm 128 makes the promise that when we try to live righteously we will be well fed and happy. We will have loving spouses and families. And it concludes with the blessing, “May you see your children's children.” As you may recall, these words have special resonance for my house in the weeks following the birth of our granddaughter. Psalm 128 reminds us to major in the major. Far too often we major in the minor. We repeatedly scan the news for evidence of the supposed perfidy of those who play for the opposing political team. We pick ourselves

to pieces for things we've done in the past. Doubt gnaws away our ability to trust beautiful promises like Psalm 128. To all of which the psalm says, “Blessed is every one who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways!”

We live by faith. We know that not all who try to walk in the ways of the Lord receive equal blessings. Most parents try their best to raise their children right. But some children struggle to walk in the right ways themselves. Some marriages disintegrate. Some entrepreneurs, despite working intelligently and hard, fail in business. Disease strikes randomly. Yet we live by faith. We need to believe that if we keep trying to live right we can receive blessings. We need to keep our eyes on the prize. We need to major in the major. There may be no more major decision we have it in our power to make than to live by faith.

In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus emphasizes another faithful decision: deciding what to treasure. He draws a stark contrast between “treasures on earth” and “treasures in heaven”. Clearly he means that we too often fall prey to the temptation to focus on amassing wealth, power, celebrity—treasures on earth. He wants us to seek after eternal treasures like his peace and living in his presence. This too requires faith. We can see what we amass in the here and now. We cannot see into the beyond. We can only trust in its existence, its truth, its value. Yet Jesus calls upon us to live in that faith. And as he so often does, he concludes with a pithy observation that leaves us no wiggle room: “for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

I am neither of the pastors who will appear in the following example. But I know them both and I have their permission to share this story. We will call them Mary and John. John serves a Presbyterian congregation of about 150 members, just less than half our size. That church stagnated for years even before the pandemic struck. Slowly but surely its membership shrunk while growing steadily older. Then came the shut-downs of March. Though they improvised ways to do virtual worship, all other programming ceased. Offerings dropped. As the months wore on John became more and more anxious. In a virtual meeting with several pastors John and Mary had approximately the following conversation.

John: "We're not doing what God calls us to do. We have to grow this church!"

"Let me stop you right there," Mary said. "Did you just say God is calling you to grow your church?"

"Yes, of course," John answered.

"No," Mary answered, "God is calling you to grow ***the people in that church***. When you do that, the church will take care of itself."

When we major in the major we focus on treasuring those things which God honors and values. We store them up, not to our own glory but to God's. Jesus calls us to invest in heavenly treasures. He calls us to invest time, effort and money in the effort to obtain them. What are the heavenly treasures? Peace, love, joy, comfort, security in Christ. He reminds us of the transitory nature of the minor things we crave. He calls us into covenant relationship with himself, a relationship in which we are given what we need. We seem bent on seeking earthly treasure. What are the true

treasures if not peace, love, joy, comfort and security? Money means nothing. At the deepest level we know this. It's not money we want. It's the things we imagine money can buy. Like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, who carried home around in her heart the whole time, we get blown far off course. We lose our bearings. We start down paths that cannot lead us home. Praise God that God still wants to guide us!

On this pledge Sunday I ask you to consider with great care where to invest yourself. What treasures do you seek to store up? Where do you want to invest your time, energy and money? I will speak plainly again. Far too many stewardship preachers I've read and heard over the years seem to lack a certain self-awareness. Stewardship sermons often follow this pattern: "Jesus says the love of money is the root of all evil. Therefore, you need to divest yourself of it. The more money you give, the better for you. Of course, **we** at church are immune to the love of money so we will **never** fall prey to its dangerous temptations! So come on, give it to us!"

This pattern misses the full meaning of Jesus' teaching. I believe he used the word treasure in part because in the language he spoke—as in the English we speak—it means both a thing of value and the act of valuing it. It is both noun and verb, subject and predicate. When we at church ask you to pledge to give of yourself, if we're doing it right, we must treasure your desire to give, your sacrifice in giving, and the value of the gift in and of itself. When we receive your gifts with this kind of appreciation we treasure you. This goes for **every** gift given, including gifts of money. That is why the more insightful sermons on stewardship rightly point out the blessings

received by all involved in the transactions: giver, receiver and people affected by the use of those gifts downstream in the ministry of that church. When we rightly understand and practice stewardship, we major in the major.

Jesus pointed to a poor woman placing a couple of coins in the Temple offering plate and **treasured** her gift. I would imagine in heaven she does not have to sit behind the rich family that gave millions to endow a great cathedral. Both gave freely. Both gave of what they had. What could you give of your treasure, that demonstrates what you treasure? Major in the major. Give of and from your heart.

Well over half of all voters in this cycle cast their ballots before the traditional election day. In a similar vein, you may already have returned your pledge card. Or it's sitting with you right now and you plan to put it in the plate on your way out of the sanctuary. If that is the case, thank you! But if you are still considering whether, and how much, money to pledge to this congregation in 2021 I ask you to consider this concept of treasure, of majoring in the major. No match challenges, no commemorative tote bags, no attempt to guilt you into giving more, nothing like that in this stewardship sermon. Instead, we will simply state that the elders, deacons and I are sincerely trying to learn what God would have the church accomplish. We are making the effort to lead the church into those ministries. They require time, energy, imagination, intelligence, love and money. Among other things. What treasure can you give to the cause?

When Kevin Buchannon finished serving this church as Interim Pastor he told me, in so many words, “They didn't need an interim. They already knew what to do and were doing it. I didn't have much to do. It was actually a little boring sometimes.” For awhile I felt a little like that myself. Then I made two realizations: 1. If God were to grant me eight to ten years as your pastor, I could put 'er in neutral and just coast in to the finish line with minimal effort. This church would keep doing what it does. And 2. I could never live with myself if I did that. ***This is a wonderful congregation. It has a healthy relational network. It does good work.*** It is not perfect. Not everybody associated with us treasures this church. Yet I stand by my assessment. And I find myself asking ***how we can share of the treasure that is this congregation with people who have never experienced such a thing?***

That is my stewardship challenge, one I have already begun addressing through the work of the Strategic Planning Task Force. The elders have its report. It contains visionary, living-in-faith recommendations for how we might grow the people in our church and grow its ministry. Those recommendations, if adopted, will draw on the gifts of the elders and deacons, of the Facilities, Mission, Christian Nurture and Communications Commissions, the staff and others. Achieving them will require the investment of everybody. I believe I hear God calling me to use them as guidance as I try to lead this church into whatever future God has in store for us. I hear God calling us to major in the major.

Please continue to give of your treasure. Thank you for your giving.