

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
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St. John's, Salem – Todd Foster
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Where your treasure is

In nomine...

0. Greetings

Good morning! I bring you greetings from St. Thomas' Episcopal Church in Glassboro. I am thrilled to be here with you this morning, and even more thrilled that Fr. Chuck is filling the pulpit and presider's chair back in Glassboro! Chuck and I, along with several other local priests, meet together most weeks for Bible Study and prayer. This has become an important rhythm in my life, something that empowers me and encourages me for ministry in this place. And often when I meet with our little community and hear Chuck's understandings of Scripture, I'll say to myself, "St. Thomas' needs to hear Chuck Messer!" We each bring our own strengths, our own understandings, our own perspectives on Scripture. I believe that St. Thomas' will be better off for having heard the particular ways in which the Holy Spirit chooses to speak through Chuck this morning, and my prayer is that that same Spirit might, by the grace of God, empower me to utter some word that might be profitable for you as well.

I. Intro: Consumers

I remember the first time I really saw a motorcycle. They were around, I'd even been permitted to ride 100 yards on the back of one belonging to an adult friend of my parents. But I'd never really been interested until one day I was sitting in my parents' car, outside a Wawa in Newark, Delaware, and a motorcycle pulled up and parked beside us. It was a BMW. I didn't know BMW made motorcycles. It was beautiful. I experienced a visceral reaction to it. But there was no way my parents would ever let me ride.

But when I got to college... A friend from church taught me to ride. On the weekends we'd ride in the mountains of Southwest Virginia. In the summers I'd ride long-distance to visit family. By the time I graduated, I had no car: just a motorcycle as I moved to Delaware for a job and then to Texas for seminary.

I've always argued for the practical nature of my choice to ride a motorcycle: but I think I'm the only one who ever believed me. And that's just because I was a sympathetic audience! Motorcycling is an identity I have embraced: a way that others know me, a way that I know myself.

Late-stage capitalism is the water in which we swim, the backdrop against which we tell our stories, the way we know ourselves. We as consumers pledge our allegiance to BMW or Harley Davidson, to Ford or Chevy, to the Eagles or the Cowboys. We're loyal to our familiar brands and to our favorite stores. Sometimes even our approach to church is as a consumer: choosing between Anglican, Evangelical, Roman, or Orthodox brands and then professing intense loyalty to one against the others. We are where we kneel, what we buy, what we wear, what we ride. Yet the call of God has always been to anchor ourselves, to find our identity, to know ourselves, to depend upon, God and nothing else.

II. Where your treasure is

So I feel like we have some pretty strong ground from which to understand what Jesus is saying in today's Gospel reading when he tells us, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." The ways we choose to spend our money are how we define – to ourselves and to the world – who we are. Money is a cipher for our own worth, our own values, our own identities. Often we use money to *purchase* our understanding of who we are.

Money is also a pipeline to whom we are becoming. A smart charity will invite you to give just a little bit. Because that begins to integrate them into your identity. So that next time you're ready to give a little bit more. And then you're ready to contribute regularly. And before you know it, you are telling others about the good work with which you're involved just by writing checks! Because where you put your money, perhaps even unwillingly at first, your heart has followed.

This is why giving to the church makes so much sense. Who should ever be on the Vestry who isn't giving a significant, proportional amount of their own resources for the ministry of the church? We show what's important to us by putting our money there, whether it be a boat, a house, a car, an education, or a relationship. The Bishop who ordained me once said that not knowing how much parishioners are pledging, both this year and historically, is spiritual

malpractice. It's like a doctor not testing your temperature and blood pressure. This is a basic and oh-so-telling metric of spiritual health in a capitalist society.

And this can be good news, right? Because what I hear Jesus saying is that, if I want to be sure of where my heart is, if I want to set my identity firmly within the Kingdom of God, I can spend my way into security. If I give to Jesus, which is widely understood as giving to the church, then my heart's going to follow and I'll know for sure that I have treasure, which is to say, a bespoke retirement plan, in heaven.

III. Isaiah's warning

And this is all true to a point. Giving to the church is a good and important, I would say critical, path toward discipleship. It's a more or less necessary part of how a capitalist becomes a follower of Christ. But it can also be deceiving. That's what our first reading, from Isaiah, is about. Isaiah speaks of God's disgust with the people's worship, and God's demand for a different kind of gift. God invites God's people to:

*seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.*

Putting one's treasure into these things will truly join one's heart to the heart of God. And by treasure, I'm talking about whatever it is that you value. Your time. Your energy. Your attention. Your care and concern. And, yes, your money.

Now if the church is doing all these things that for which Isaiah is crying out:

*seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow*

then the church might be an important part of your portfolio of investment into alignment with God. Just like a mutual fund can help you capture larger pieces of the financial markets. But the point isn't simply signaling your virtue, passing a litmus test of goodness or holiness, or

laundering your reputation like a robber baron building a library. It's about meeting God by engaging in the works of God, loving the people that God created.

IV. Invitation

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

On what do we as a nation spend our treasure? I'm talking about both government spending and the massive lobbyist and campaign spending that goes on. That's where our national heart is. How do you feel about that? What is God calling you to do about that?

On what as a church do we spend our treasure? From our church budgets and from special contributions. What do we learn about where our heart is as a church by looking at the annual budget approved by Vestry? What is God calling us to do about that?

I'm told VBS is starting here tomorrow. That seems like a great place to start.

On what do we as families and individuals spend our treasure? Where is your identity, your passion, your commitment? Forget about your feelings: they can be deceptive. Just go read your credit card statement or your checkbook register. Review your day planner and your to-do lists. They'll tell you honestly what's important to you. Then you get to decide what to do with the answer. What is God calling you to do?

God's invitation is to seek justice, to rescue the oppressed, and to care for the vulnerable. Because if we put our treasure there, our heart will follow. And when our heart is close to the heart of God, well, that seems like a good place to be.

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