

Priceless Treasure
Matthew 19:16-22
March 19, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
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My grandmother had a jewelry box full of costume jewelry from the 1950s and '60s, and when I was a child, I loved to play with those pieces: gaudy clip-on earrings that were so tight they made my head ache, huge brooches, beads in every possible color. I felt so grown-up when I wore those!

My grandmother only ever owned two pieces of jewelry of any real value. Both were gifts to her. She wouldn't have bought them for herself. And I didn't get to play with those. She had a string of pearls (a Christmas present from my father) and an opal ring. The ring was a gift from my grandfather for their 35th wedding anniversary. When my grandmother passed away, my dad gave the pearls to my sister Pam, and he gave the opal ring to me. I am wearing it today. It has three large opals, and it is really too big for my hand, which is why I don't wear it often.

But I do wear it when I most need to feel my grandmother close to me. I wore it right here at my ecclesiastical council, for example, when the Merrimack Association decided whether it was okay for me to be ordained. I couldn't imagine facing all those questions and that life-changing decision without her beside me. I treasure this ring, probably more than any other earthly possession. I treasure it because it is an irreplaceable symbol of my relationship with my grandmother, and I can't be with her any more, not in this life.

I love and enjoy many of my other possessions, but I don't treasure them in the same way. Our home for example: I love its big, bright windows, the cozy fireplace, and the high vaulted ceilings. I am grateful that it keeps us safe and warm. But I know that Dave and I can make ourselves happily at home almost anywhere. I appreciate my car, too, but I don't treasure it. My car gets me to church and to the grocery store and to the post office. In really special times it takes us to visit our grandchildren. But another car would probably serve just as well.

Which of your earthly possessions do you treasure? Which ones are so deeply meaningful to you that you could not possibly imagine parting with them? And which ones are valuable just because they are useful? It is interesting to do that mental inventory.

In our scripture today, a rich young man comes to see Jesus and says, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus says simply, "Keep the commandments."

The young man presses on as though he has a checklist. "Which ones?" he asks.

Jesus answers, *[sigh]* "Don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't bear false witness, honor your father and mother." That is, Jesus lists practically the whole second table of the commandments – the ones about how we treat one another – and for good measure he adds on "love your neighbor as yourself," from Leviticus.

Now I want to pause for a moment and note that there are only two places in the Gospel of Matthew that mention eternal life. This is one, and the other is the passage we read last week in which Jesus says, "I was hungry and you gave me food." From the point of view of this gospel, eternal life is the reward for ethical living – following the commandments, loving our neighbors, and taking care of those in need.

There is nothing here about faith or theology. No, here Jesus says we are judged on how we act, on how we treat others, not on the fine points of our beliefs.

The young man is eager to claim that he has kept all the commandments and loved his neighbor. "Check! What else?" he asks.

Jesus responds, *[pause, sigh]* "If you wish to be perfect [that is, if you wish to be mature in your faith], go and sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me." This stops the young man in his tracks. No more eagerness. No more checklist. Eternal life will require more of him than he thought. He imagined he could have it all – earthly possessions and eternal life. He leaves grieving.

You have to wonder, if it grieved him so much to give his possessions to the poor, did he really love his neighbor as himself?

This has always been a troubling passage for Christians because we want to have it all, too. So, preachers and theologians have strained to find ways to understand this scripture that don't require so much from us. For centuries the Roman Catholic church has taught that ordinary Christians – like us – do not have to give up our wealth, but some few are called to be perfect – that is, called to religious orders with vows of poverty and chastity and obedience.

Protestants have typically rejected this two-tiered Christianity, but we haven't wanted to give up our possessions, either. So, some have suggested that Jesus didn't mean we all need to do that, only this young man, because Jesus knew that that was the task of faith that he particularly needed to do.

I'm not so sure about that. I don't think Jesus gives the rest of us a pass on this commandment since he talks a lot about our relationship with money. He comes back over and over again to what we truly treasure; too often, he says, it is our earthly possessions that hold a central place in our hearts.

I am not going to tell you that you have to give up all your possessions. That is between you and God. I will tell you that this question is one we shouldn't skim past, as though there were an easy answer, because there is not. God calls us to be radically open to the Kingdom of Heaven that is breaking into this world, and sometimes the things we own hold us back, hold us down, keep us pinned to earth.

You may have heard the news: We can't take it with us. I can't even take my beautiful opal ring with me, though at the end of my life, I won't need it any more because I will get to see my grandmother herself again. When we come to the end of our lives, regardless of the size of our bank accounts, we will all be flat broke. None of our possessions will matter because they won't be available to us anymore.

But if we truly love our neighbors as ourselves, then our whole life can become a gift to others – our time, our attention, our energy, our love, ... and our money. When we mature in our faith to that point, then we are living in the eternal life that Jesus promises, not later, but now. And THAT is a priceless treasure.

Amen