Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Luke 12: 34)

To me, this is one of the most true and beautiful lines in all of scripture. Whatever we value most in life, good or bad, is that to which we will give our hearts. And at times, if we take a hard look at the things we value most highly, we’ll find that we’re giving our hearts to unworthy things, and that will snap us into a change in priorities and behaviours.

Countless times over the past few weeks, I have heard people in Canmore and Calgary and High River who have suffered huge material losses, shrug their shoulders and say that “it’s all just stuff.” Other than family keepsakes and ruined photos that are truly irreplaceable, people have sized up their attachment to their worldly possessions and realized that these things are not their treasure. Their treasure is their family and friends, their memories, the new sense of community that has emerged from challenging circumstances: “Stay Strong and Canmore On” as the signs say in our shop windows.

This week, I stumbled across a story from the 3rd century that has some deep relevance for this discussion of treasures, and how we hold and share them. It’s the story of St. Lawrence, the archdeacon of Rome under Pope Sixtus. (Note: in more than three decades of preaching I think I have referred to the stories of canonized Saints, other than the apostles, either two or three times, so it takes quite a bit for a Saint story to catch my attention!)

According to www.catholic.org,

“[Lawrence was entrusted with] the care of the treasury and riches of the church, and the distribution of alms among the poor…. Roman authorities had [ordered that]…all Christians who had been denounced must be executed and their goods confiscated by the Imperial treasury. …

After the [execution of Pope] Sixtus, the prefect of Rome demanded that Lawrence turn over the riches of the Church. …Lawrence asked for three days to gather together the wealth. [He] worked swiftly to distribute as much Church property to the poor as possible, so as to prevent its being seized by the prefect. On the third day, at the head of a small delegation, he presented himself to the prefect, and when ordered to give up the treasures of the Church, he presented the poor, the crippled, the blind and the suffering, and said that these were the true treasures of the Church. [He then declared] to the prefect, “The Church is truly rich, far richer than your emperor.” This act of defiance led directly to his martyrdom.”

The details of his story might not stand up to sharp 21st-century scrutiny, but the legend of St. Lawrence speaks directly to what we consider to be our treasure, and how deeply we hold that in the heart. Lawrence, rather than seeing those in need to be a burden to the Church, embraced generosity as a core Christian virtue and literally gave all for the sake of the poor. His festival day was yesterday, the 1755th anniversary of his death (so perhaps at some point today, you might raise a glass or offer a prayer in his honour).

If you get nothing else out of this message, other than this imperative for economic justice, that’s quite OK. Jesus repeatedly comes at this theme, putting it at the forefront of his portrayal of our final reckoning with God. But as I was digging into this scripture about treasures, it kept challenging me to see it as something that goes well beyond the financial.

For sure, if the main goal of your life is the accumulation of wealth, you’re on the wrong track and that’s gotta change, full stop. But many of us have found, in examining our lives, that our ultimate goals are not related to money. Our hearts and our treasures are related to other things: having a rewarding career; raising content, emotionally healthy children; building a strong and enduring marriage. Or perhaps our hearts and treasures are inextricably bound to certain beliefs about the world: the pursuit of fairness; a commitment to not rescue people from the consequences of their
actions; a devotion to orderliness and common sense. Or maybe we have a single focus or involvement that outstrips all others: a cause, charity, service club, sport or activity that takes most of our spare time and all of our free attention. Whatever it may be, a lot of people, particularly Church folk, find that something other than money is at the core of their being. They have identified the non-monetary gifts of life that they truly treasure, know that these things live in their hearts, and trust that these treasures will be safe.

But what happens if something goes awry? One year ago this weekend, I got together with a long-time friend whom I had not seen for years, and took him out for a birthday lunch. He was absolutely on his game, boisterous, opinionated, engaged in the world around him, happy with the work he was doing, deeply in love with a woman he had known long before and had found again. Two months later, his primary relationship had become deeply unhealthy and needed to end, a couple of other things turned sideways, and my friend committed suicide. He knew the deepest treasures of his life, and when they were severed from his heart, there was no recovering to be done: life’s meaning had gone, and that was that. I lament that so many people have followed this same route, seeing no hope whatsoever when the key treasure of their heart is broken. Whether they literally end their life, or end it in all practical terms by withdrawing from their closest support systems and slowly dwindling off to nothingness, it is profoundly sad when the loss of treasure leads to these life-extinguishing choices.

When the deepest treasure of your heart is harmed, or removed, or betrayed, how do you keep moving forward? Or, when something deeply hurtful happens in life, how do you keep THAT from becoming your heart’s treasure? How do you keep from living a life based primarily on a sense of woundedness, unintentionally placing on a pedestal a particular traumatic event, an internalized message of self-loathing from your youth, the devastation of abuse, an unresolved grief, a brokenness in your life?

Seeking some guidance in response to these questions, I turned to three sources who know quite a bit more about this than I do.

Realizing that NOBODY, least of all me, has the right to tell an abuse survivor to just move along with their lives as if nothing happened, the first place I turn is to a pair of authors named Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, who work directly with female survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

In their book, *The Courage to Heal*, they write (p.60),

“The decision to heal from child sexual abuse is a powerful, life-affirming choice. It is a commitment every survivor deserves to make. Although you may have already experienced some healing in your life – through the nurturing of a foster family, the caring of an intimate partner, or the satisfaction of work you love – deciding to heal, making your own growth and recovery a priority, sets in motion a healing force that will bring to your life a richness and depth you never dreamed possible. [As one survivor told us], ‘For the first time I’m appreciating things like the birds and the flowers, the way the sun feels on my skin – you know, really simple things. I don’t ever remember enjoying these things, even as a little kid. I’ve woken up… for the first time, I feel alive, and that’s something to go for.”

The line that jumps out at me from that quote, is that every survivor DESERVES to make a decision to heal. Not that they should, or must, or that anyone else can force them to, but that there is an inner, unassailable goodness within each person, such that they deserve healing. Nobody can tell you to stay with the status quo, lest somebody else be injured as you walk your healing path; if you have been wounded, you deserve to seek health and wholeness.

If life takes aim at the treasure of your heart – or if you realize that you have been giving too much of yourself to something that is does not really deserve that special place in your life – know that God’s greatest intention for you is to be healed and whole. No matter what the source of brokenness or imbalance, even something for which you carry a bunch of guilt or shame, you deserve to grab hold of your life, and make the decision to heal. Even if you carry within you an incurable illness, healing
of your relationships - with yourself, with the world around you, and with the Divine - is possible, and you deserve nothing less than this. This desire for God's greatest good intention is at the cornerstone of the healing pathway ministry at Ralph Connor, and if you're wondering where to start a quest to be healed, that's one place I can definitely recommend.

I turn next to a Christian Psychiatrist named Frank Freed, whom I met 15 years ago at a seminar in California, back in the heyday of the Crystal Cathedral. Frank was a World War II veteran who lost most of his right arm in battle. His loss was overwhelming and devastating, and he was convinced that his life from then on would be as broken and incomplete as that limb.

A fellow soldier was also recovering from grave injuries and could see how Frank was struggling with his loss. The soldier looked him in the eye and said, “Frank, the experience you have just gone through will either make you a bitter person or a better person. The choice is completely up to you.” In his words, Frank said (p.36) "that's when I called on divine guidance to help me make the right decision. Would I become bitter or better? More aware or angrier? Positive or pessimistic? I'm grateful that God gave me the courage to make the right choice."

That may sound trite or simplistic, but it is true that we have the power to choose: better, or bitter. Note that when Ellen Bass and Laura Davis talked about healing from childhood sexual abuse, they too spoke of a choice, or decision, to heal – it's a process that we initiate. Nobody says that it will be easy, and professional assistance of some sort may well be needed to keep the process moving, but nowhere in scripture is it suggested that external challenges have the power to ruin our lives. As Paul says in the 8th chapter of Romans (vv.35-39), “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” So there we have the second key point in recovering from blunt trauma to our heart's treasure: the power to choose a new path forward.

The third source I turn to is a lovely book entitled *Turning to One Another* by Meg Wheatley, an expert in organizational behaviour and systems change. She writes about the next step in the process, and that is to move beyond ourselves and enjoy the advantage of living in community.

“Relationships,” she writes (p.23),

> “are all there is. Everything in the universe only exists because it is in relationship to everything else. Nothing exists in isolation. We have to stop pretending we are individuals who can go it alone. We humans want to be together. We only isolate ourselves when we’re hurt by others, but alone is not our natural state. Today, we live in an unnatural state – separating ourselves rather than being together.”

And then, as she gets deeper into the topic, she writes (p.40)

> "We have the opportunity many times a day, every day, to be the one who listens to others, curious rather than certain. But the greatest benefit of all is that listening moves us closer. When we listen with less judgment, we always develop better relationship with each other. It’s not differences that divide us. It’s our judgments about each other that do. Curiosity and good listening bring us back together."

As we do the hard work of disentangling ourselves from heart-commitments that are not worthy; as we recover from the brokenness of grief or profound disappointment or betrayal, at some point we find ourselves drawn away from the immensity of that small but intense problem, to engage the give-and-take of supportive community. I hope that Ralph Connor Memorial United Church can be one of those special places in your life, but at the very least, I hope that you can identify *someplace* in your life – a friendship or a counsellor or a group - where it is safe to talk about the deep stuff, even when it is in transition, even when it makes you mad. That's the sense of Beloved Community that I spoke
about back on June 23rd, living in the midst of a place where support is close, because the power of the Divine is closer.

There’s so much more that can be said on this topic – Buddhist precepts about not getting so attached to things in the first place; spirit teachings about healing being found deep within oneself; and the sage advice, to be patient with yourself in all of this – but for now, I’m going to leave it at these three points at engaging brokenness in life:

1. **You deserve to seek healing, and it is God’s desire that you find it;**
2. **Your stance toward life, better or bitter, is yours to choose;**
3. **The power of relationships can help us break out of an isolated and painful place.**

Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Whether you find that statement hopeful and affirming, bittersweet and painful, or just plain challenging, I pray that your journey will be one filled with hope, and health, and an ever-deepening connection to the love of God. Amen.

*Works cited:*


http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?sa...