**Weekend of Sunday, October 1, 2023**

**18th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 26/Year A**

**First Reading: Ezekiel 18:1-4; 25-32**

**Second Reading: Philippians 2:1-13**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 21:23-32**

**2024 Annual Stewardship Campaign – Week One**

**Sermon Title: *“Where Your Heart Is – Your Treasure”***

**Theme**

*Jesus’ parable about two sons who don’t do what they say reveals surprises in the reign of God. In the reading from Ezekiel the people claim the ways of the Lord are unfair, while God offers repentance and new life. Paul urges us to look to Christ as a model of humility, putting the interests of others above our own. Nourished by the broken bread and shared cup, we offer our lives for the sake of our needy world.*

**Texts:**

**Campaign Text: Matthew 6:19-21**

19"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

**First Reading: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32**

*Ezekiel challenges those who think they cannot change because of what their parents were and did, or who think they cannot reverse their own previous behavior. God insistently invites people to turn and live.*

1The word of the Lord came to me: 2What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge”? 3As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. 4Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.
 25Yet you say, “The way of the Lord is unfair.” Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? 26When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. 27Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. 28Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die. 29Yet the house of Israel says, “The way of the Lord is unfair.” O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair?
 30Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. 31Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? 32For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.

**Second Reading: Philippians 2:1-13**

*As part of a call for harmony rather than self-seeking, Paul uses a very early Christian hymn that extols the selflessness of Christ in his obedient death on the cross. Christ’s selfless perspective is to be the essential perspective we share as the foundation for Christian accord.*

1If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 2make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
 6who, though he was in the form of God,
  did not regard equality with God
  as something to be exploited,
 7but emptied himself,
  taking the form of a slave,
  being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form,
  8he humbled himself
  and became obedient to the point of death—
  even death on a cross.

 9Therefore God also highly exalted him
  and gave him the name
  that is above every name,
 10so that at the name of Jesus
  every knee should bend,
  in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
 11and every tongue should confess
  that Jesus Christ is Lord,
  to the glory of God the Father.

 12Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; 13for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

**Gospel: Matthew 21:23-32**

*After driving the moneychangers out of the temple (21:12), Jesus begins teaching there. His authority is questioned by the religious leaders, who are supposed to be in charge of the temple.*

23When [Jesus] entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” 24Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ 26But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” 27So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.
 28“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ 29He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. 30The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. 31Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”

**Sermon**

Welcome to week one of the 2024 Annual Stewardship Campaign that I have entitled, “Where Your Heart Is.” That expression comes from Jesus himself as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. Hear it as we begin this three-week campaign.

Matthew 6:19"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

As we begin this campaign, this week focusing on our treasure or what we treasure, allow me to ask you that question, and not meaninglessly, but intentionally to sew the seed in your hearts and minds for future meditation. “Where is your heart?”

These words spoken by Jesus challenge us to examine the desires and priorities of our hearts. They call us to consider our stewardship of the resources with which we have been entrusted.

Years ago, I heard some financial guru say that becoming a millionaire is really not all that difficult. All we have to do is make accumulating a million dollars our highest and perhaps our only priority. We Americans spend a lot of money on our homes, cars, clothes, makeup, and whatever else interests us – I’m not passing judgment, I do it too. But if we want to become millionaires we will have to focus only on the money.

When I was in seminary in Columbus, I worked at Faith Mission, a homeless shelter, and there was a regular at the mission whom everyone said was worth a lot of money. He went to work every day using his free bus pass, came back to the mission for a hot and a cot, and did it all over again the next day. He had no expenses and was therefore able to bank 100% of his paycheck. I can just imagine that if he keeps it up, within years, he will have a million dollars. But I don’t want to live in a homeless shelter. I want to enjoy the good life that God has given me.

Today as we delve into this topic, we will also draw inspiration from the book of Ezekiel, the letter to the Philippians, and another passage from Matthew. So, let us begin our journey into understanding the profound implications of where our hearts truly are.

I could ask each of you where your heart is and many would say, right here in the middle of my chest, and you would be correct. That is where the organ we call the heart is located. We cannot live without it; it provides the blood that is life to our entire body and being.

But others might answer more esoterically. My heart is what I devote my attention to. For some it might be family, home, a hobby – but our readings for today warn that our God is a jealous God.

If I were able to ask the same question of the ancient Israelites of Ezekiel’s day during the Babylonian exile, the honest answer would almost certainly *not* include any mention of faithfulness to God. In our First Reading from the prophet Ezekiel, we hear the voice of God through the prophet scolding the Israelites for generational infidelity – in other words, their faithlessness toward God has gone on for generations to the point that the current generation offers the “that’s the way we’ve always done it” excuse. So the LORD reminds them that they must make the decision to return to faithfulness on their own. Living for themselves and their own selfish pleasure has not profited them, and so the LORD tells them, each of them

30Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. 31Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? 32For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.

So in the conclusion of that passage, the LORD seems to indicate that the nation of Israel is so far from Him that what they really need is a heart and spirit transplant! This message applies to us. The LORD God is pretty angry at the Israelites, and yet, arguably, our faithfulness to God and personal stewardship is worse! We should heed this ancient warning. We should repent of our faithlessness and live for the LORD, for it is the only choice that brings life and not death.

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, provides us with a glimpse of what it means to have the heart of a steward. He writes that we should use whatever ever spiritual gift we have to prosper the congregation. He writes,

4Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

These verses call us to emulate the humility and selflessness of Christ. Stewardship is not about self-seeking but about considering the interests of others. It's about having the same mind as Christ living out His example of sacrificial love. Another way of putting it might be to align our hearts with the heart of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Turning our attention to another passage from the Gospel of Matthew, our Gospel Reading, we find the parable of the two brats, I mean, two sons. In this parable, Jesus illustrates the importance of aligning our actions with the alignment of our hearts.

As you heard, in the parable, a father asks his two sons to work in the vineyard. The first son initially refuses but later changes his mind and goes to work. The second son agrees to go but doesn't follow through. When Jesus asks the crowd which of the two sons did the father's will, they respond that it was the first son who ultimately obeyed.

This parable reminds us that it's not enough to merely say the right things or make empty promises. True stewardship, where our hearts are aligned with God revealed in Jesus Christ, involves action. Our deeds should reflect the genuine condition of our hearts, just as the first son's actions revealed his true intentions.

Returning to our campaign text from the Gospel of Matthew, let's delve deeper into Jesus' words:

19"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

In this passage Jesus urges us to examine the alignment of our hearts and asks us if we are preoccupied with accumulating earthly treasures that will eventually let us down, or if are we investing in eternal treasures? Our alignment is evident in the way we use our time, talents, and resources, but today I am focusing on our resources.

The church is Christ’s creation and gift to the world. Worship in the Temple or the local synagogue was his custom and if it’s important to him, it ought to be important to us.

The local congregation is Christ’s gift to us. It’s the place we

* **encourage** one another,
* **give** of our time, talent, and treasure to advance the Kingdom of God,
* **invite** others into a relationship with God revealed in Jesus Christ,
* **pray** for our concerns, the concerns of others, and the concerns of the world,
* **serve** others following the example of Jesus Christ,
* **study** God’s Word, the Bible, and how to live out our lives of discipleship, and
* **worship** God for all His many benefits.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

Dear friends, our journey through Scripture today has brought us face to face with the profound question: "Where is your heart?" Are we, like the Israelites in Ezekiel's time, making excuses for our actions and blaming external factors? Or are we, inspired by the example of Christ and guided by the parable of the two sons, aligning our hearts with God's will and reflecting that alignment in our deeds?

In the culture we live in, there are many attractive choices to invest ourselves in. All of them will let us down. None of them pay eternal rewards. So I exhort you to support your congregation with your time, talent, and treasure.

As stewards of God's gifts, we are called to prioritize the treasures of heaven, investing our time, talents, and resources in ways that honor God and serve others. Our hearts, when aligned with God’s will and centered on Christ, become sources of love, generosity, and compassion.

Let us heed the words of Jesus and seek first the Kingdom of God, knowing that where our treasure is, there our heart will be also. May our hearts be transformed by the renewing power of the Holy Spirit, and may our stewardship be a testimony of our love for God and our commitment to His Kingdom.

**Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the guidance and wisdom found in your Word. We acknowledge that our hearts are prone to wander and be distracted by worldly treasures. Help us, Lord, to set our hearts on the eternal treasures of your Kingdom. May we be faithful stewards of all you have entrusted to us, living with the mind of Christ and reflecting His love in all we do. In His name, we pray. Amen.