

Devotions – February 2-8, 2020

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Sunday, February 2, 2020

Text: Matthew 6:20-21

“Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

The gospel of Matthew presents Jesus as a prophet greater than Moses, and also a teacher greater than Solomon. The wisdom Jesus offers directs us to find meaning in life in the kingdom of God (in Matthew’s vocabulary, “heaven”). And he warns us about the dangers of fixating on the pursuit of wealth and treasure.

There have been plenty of studies on the relationship between wealth and happiness. They all show similar results: no matter what our present income or wealth, we think we would need twice as much to finally be happy. Even those who make \$500,000 annually think they would need a million dollars to be satisfied. The more you have, the harder it is to reach your goal!

Jesus recommends treasures in heaven, not just in terms of a distant future, but real treasure found in the here and now reality of God’s kingdom. God is present for us in Jesus, and Jesus promises to be present wherever two or three gather in his name. Solomon may have been celebrated for his earthly wealth, but we have the true wealth of our life together in the community of Jesus.

Let us pray: *Open our hearts, gracious God, to the true wealth of our life in your kingdom. Help us to celebrate the presence of Jesus in our world, and free us from the quest for evermore money and stuff. Make us truly thankful for the simple gifts of daily life. Amen.*



Monday, February 3, 2020

Text: Matthew 7:7-8

“Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.”

Most of us struggle with the business of asking God for the things we really need. But Jesus promises that God wants us to come to him in prayer, to ask for the things we need day by day. In the previous chapter, Jesus encourages us to ask for “the bread we need today.” We might learn to ask for the simple gift of enough, enough to take care of the needs we have each day.

And if we learn the blessing of having enough, we might also learn to ask God to open our eyes and our minds to the needs of the world around us. Those needs are answered when God's kingdom breaks into the world. But somehow, it makes a difference when we ask for that gift of the kingdom. Jesus' promise is that when we ask, God answers. And so, we need to come with our prayers "as dear children ask their loving father." We may well be surprised when our prayers become prayers for God's kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven."

Let us pray: *Almighty God, help us to pray with boldness and confidence in your generous love. Teach us to ask for the things that our world truly needs, and for the contentment of knowing that you desire to give us everything we need. Amen.*



Tuesday, February 4, 2020

Text: Matthew 16:25

"For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for me will find it."

We often say that the kingdom of God turns the values of this world upside down. The first will be last, the poor are lifted up above the rich, sinners will enter the kingdom ahead of the righteous. Nowhere is this "upside down logic" more apparent than in Jesus' invitation to discipleship. In the words of Bonhoeffer, "When Jesus calls us, he bids us to come and die." Those words have a special poignancy for Bonhoeffer's story, for indeed, his discipleship did lead to martyrdom.

Here in Matthew 16, Jesus tells us that real purpose and meaning in life is not found in the pursuit of wealth, prestige, or power, but simply in letting Jesus be the light and guide of our life. We celebrate the lives of those who have followed this truth to the ends of the earth, people like Albert Schweitzer or Mother Theresa, or even the missionary families from our own congregations. But this is a word for every disciple: if you want to really know the meaning of life, then follow Jesus. The promise of success and wealth that this world offers is a false promise, and ultimately the path to losing life, not gaining it. Following Jesus leads to real life, abundant life, life in God's kingdom.

Let us pray: *Dear Lord Jesus, shape our lives by the pattern of your life, open our minds to the truth of your wisdom, mold our hearts by the example of your love. Help us all to find true life in following you. Amen.*



Wednesday, February 5, 2020

Text: Matthew 18: 4-5

"Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me."

One of the greatest joys of my work in the church is the presence of little children: children at play, children at worship, children at Sunday School, VBS, and Fortune Lake. Even children in confirmation! A large part of that is their simple honesty, what Jesus refers to here as their humility. In little children we see human nature without pretensions, without phoniness, without any claim to greatness or power. That this simplicity is easily corrupted even in children is a reminder of the power of our adult example.

Jesus lifts up a little child as an example of true greatness in God's kingdom. Perhaps the disciples were hoping he would point to one of them! But as he so often does, Jesus turns their logic upside down. And then he adds one more surprise, "When you welcome this child, you welcome me." The Lord of heaven and earth promises to be with us in the children in our families and congregations.

Let us pray: *God of love, help us to see your presence in the children of our world. Help us to learn from their example of humble simplicity and give us the gift of a child-like faith. Amen.*



Thursday, February 6, 2020

Text: Matthew 19: 21

Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

This story of the Rich Young Man continues to convict all of us who live in the culture of wealth that surrounds us in the United States. Perhaps we too tell ourselves that we are upright and law-abiding citizens. Tom Wright suggests that this young man has "collected" the Ten Commandments like little trophies, and so Jesus tells him, "If you have done all that, then here is the one to complete your set: sell everything and give your wealth to the poor." And that, of course, is the one thing he cannot bring himself to do.

What is it that gets in the way of our complete obedience to Jesus? I often think of the amazing variety of "toys" that have invaded our lives in the last 25 years: cell phones, I-pads, computers, four-wheelers, snowmobiles, hunting equipment, pick-up trucks and tractors—so much stuff that we have to build extra barns to keep everything in. It becomes the source of our identity, and Jesus wants us to identify first with him. His word to us is probably the same as to the young man: give it away, make God's kingdom your treasure.

Let us pray: *God of all creation, we know the riches of this world in ways that our grandparents could never have dreamed of. But all of those things can easily become a burden on our lives and our souls. Help us to always put you first in our lives, and to use our stuff to bless others. Amen.*



Friday, February 7, 2020

Text: Matthew 20:26-27

“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

This is the story of Mrs. Zebedee, who only wants what is best for her sons, James and John. It is comical, and in our age of helicopter parents, we might well chuckle at a mother who has followed Jesus and her sons all the way to Jericho, just so she could voice her mother’s love in a request for honor and prestige. I can just see James and John hiding their faces in embarrassment, but also thinking that now they will never get those places of honor.

And the other disciples are all angry with James and John! So once again, Jesus reminds them that God’s kingdom turns our expectations upside-down: the greatest will be the servant, and the first must be last, and slaves will be greater than their masters. There is one young father in our congregation who volunteers to do the dishes at every congregation meal. He says it’s the one thing he can do well. And everyone loves him for it! Do we hear this challenge in our lives of faith: how can my life serve God and his people?

Let us pray: *Dear Lord Jesus, help us to understand your call to servanthood. Inspire us by the example of your life and give us the assurance that in serving the needs of our world, we are also serving you. Amen.*



Saturday, February 8, 2020

Text: Matthew 25:40

“I tell you the truth, whatever you did to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did to me.”

This story from Jesus is one of amazing power: it helps us to see the world through God’s eyes. It is also the final story that Jesus tells in Matthew’s gospel, and serves as a sort of summation of all the others. How will God deal with the (Gentile) nations of the world? What will God’s justice look like? The answer of course, is Jesus, and his presence in the world.

When Jesus says, “Whatever you did to the least of my brothers and sisters, you did to me,” he shapes Christian ethics and social concern for rest of history. What matters is not pity, mercy, or self-interest, but the simple truth that he has chosen to be present in the hungry, the sick, the stranger and the prisoner. If we want to serve Jesus, he points us to the smallest and the least. And this is what will ultimately matter: do we see Jesus in the suffering and needy in our world? Does our nation and do the rest of the nations of the world recognize God’s claim on our wealth and our compassion? Do we recognize Jesus when he is in our midst?

Let us pray: *God of the nations, open our hearts to your concern for the suffering of the world. Grant that your people might always see the face of Jesus in the faces of the hungry, the stranger, the homeless, the imprisoned. Make us instruments of your love. Amen.*

