

*Texts: Matthew 6:7-21*

*Subject: Treasure in Heaven*

*Theme: Being Religious*

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany; February 3, 2019, Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from our Father in heaven and the Lord Jesus who is the Christ. Amen.

Maybe you are very familiar with this passage of scripture, but did you catch that last verse? “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” We often hear that as your giving follows your heart. So if you love Jesus, give to the church. I hope you don’t hear it preached that way at this church, but I’m sure it’s been done that way somewhere. Jesus tells the ones following him, the ones who likely have very little to give in the way of finances, that “where your treasure is, there your heart will be.” That which you value most, will be the focus of your heart. It makes sense. That thing that we seek, that which we desire, whatever we place great value upon becomes the focus of our hearts, of our lives. It becomes our religion. It’s so natural, that we hardly notice it. But we do it.

There are books and movies all about it - Have you heard of the Secret?

From the movie description on Amazon Prime:

*The Secret' explains, with simplicity, the law that is governing all lives, and offers the knowledge of how to create, intentionally and effortlessly, a joyful life. This is The Secret to life. Now, for the first time in history, all the pieces of The Secret come together in a revelation that is life-transforming for all who experience it.*

At risk of mischaracterizing this “masterpiece,” I’ll explain. I understand the secret to be that if you want something you have to be all about it, think about it all the time, and make it the focus and intention of every day. If you want a great job, you have to ‘put it

out in the universe, and be mindful about that job, and dream about all the details, and it will come to you. It's not really a secret, is it. Maybe what really happens is that if you are serious about wanting that job, you do the things it actually takes to get that job, and eventually find something close to what you had intended to find.

I have a list of life goals. I wrote them down almost 5 years ago in an apartment on Vegas Drive. Someone told me that was a good idea. I guess if you write down your goals they become real. So I put pen to paper and I wrote. I won't read them all to you. But a few are:

1. Buy a house.
2. Get out of debt.
3. Become a husband and a father.
4. Buy a boat.
5. Visit Europe.
6. Retire at age 60.

Some of them I accomplished. Others I have crossed out. I did buy a house. I went to Portugal with Hawk. I met Ivy, got married and am the father of 4 beautiful souls. I did not buy a boat, and I probably won't. I paid off some student loans and credit cards, but I'm not really out of debt. So I guess I won't be retiring any time soon.

When something really matters to us, when it becomes treasure, our hearts follow. There's no secret to it, when we are clear about our direction, when we value something, we make it the focus of our attention and intention. To be intentional is to purposefully direct our energy, thoughts and actions toward a goal. Human beings have been created with minds that imagine great futures, bodies that can strive for greatness,

and hearts that long to make a difference in this world for ourselves and for the ones we love. Those are gifts that come from God who treasures us.

Human beings also have the power to take something good and use it in a way that causes harm to ourselves, to others, and to our world. We can dream of chemicals that allow seeds to produce more food, and then fail to solve problems of hunger and access to food, even in the places where that food is grown and harvested. We can have bodies that perform great feats of athleticism, or can be used to hurt and destroy others. We have hearts that can be compassionate and loving, or cruel and without regard for the ones we know are in deepest need.

Our motivation matters and the things we do form us.

Jesus prayed all the time - like, religiously. The gospels tell us he prayed alone at times, and with his disciples. He prayed intentionally at times that were turning points in his ministry, giving thanks, and communing with God the Father. He prayed for his friends and followers, in the garden he prays, and on the cross he speaks openly to God.

When we go out to eat as a family, we'll pray in public. Quietly, not to make a big show, but to teach our children that in all places and at all times, we give thanks to God for our food, each other, and all that we have. It might seem awkward at times. Maybe some will think we're church people. There are not usually trumpets involved. Jesus isn't trying to tell people to hide their prayers, but not to be like the people of the times that chanted magic words to gain power or profit; not to try to show off to be favored by other religious leaders; not to draw attention to themselves, but to take seriously the special relationship between God and all of creation.

Jesus wasn't trying to teach people to be religious.

He wasn't trying to create church people.

Jesus taught his followers about what it means to be *Kingdom people*. James Bailey writes, "Praying and practicing the Lord's prayer will shift our attention and energy to becoming kingdom people rather than narrowly existing as church people." Jesus is modeling for them what it means to be in relationship with God. He is embodying the way to live in the Kingdom, to be a disciple, to truly be as God created them to be. He begins by teaching them a prayer, but it is really more than that. Prayers existed in every world religion in some form or another. There were incantations to begin wealth and words spoken to please pagan deities. Jewish prayer was different, in that it didn't seek material gain, or to manipulate God. The Lord's Prayer, as we know it, is a model for all Christian prayer.

It begins by acknowledging the one who is higher than any other. The relationship with God is in the first two words. We can be mindful that every time we pray we are speaking inclusively with the one who is parent - not male, of course, but loving creator and provider and protector of all who speak these words.

"Give us this day, our daily bread." We pray the Lord's prayer all the time, but do we really hear these words? Can they be true? 16 million people watched the last season finale of Game of Thrones. Over 24,000 people in Southern Nevada will experience homelessness this year. Over 100 million of us will watch a football game this evening. One in eight people in our community struggles with hunger. This prayer is not about me and my bread, but "our" bread. It implies community, and names our reliance on God to provide what we need each day.

We don't pray this prayer to be more religious. We pray that we would hear the word and will of God, and be drawn out of our selfishness into the kingdom for the sake of our neighbors. This is our prayer, received in baptism, calling us into a lifetime of work and witness to God's goodness, and the wholeness that Jesus brings. We pray not for our own glory and honor, but to be reminded that even though we fail to live it out at times, we are loved by our merciful redeemer and forgiven and in turn called to go and forgive ones who hurt us, and to turn to God to rescue us in every need. This prayer boldly claims we are a part of God's mission, called through the word to serve in the name of the risen Christ and to share God's mercy grace given to us at great cost.

So if you're writing a list of goals, and somewhere in there you write, "be more religious" you might think about crossing it out and putting something like "be kingdom people." This is who Jesus is calling his followers to be.

It's no secret. It's not easy.

We won't get it all right. But maybe *that's* why we call ourselves church. Because it is here as the church that we gather to pray together at the foot of the cross. We give thanks, we share our pain and confess our own selfishness, and we hear the good news of Jesus, who conquered sin, death, the devil - and religion too, that we would be truly free, to be the kingdom here.