

When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place

A sermon by Jackie Clement

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

Matthew 6:19-21

These words from the Gospel of Matthew are part of the Sermon on the Mount, a collection of wisdom and sayings offered by Jesus early in his ministry. The general theme of the sermon is to seek perfection of the spirit and to seek the Kingdom of God in heaven. Here particularly, in these words about storing up treasures, we are urged to set aside the temporal concerns of the world in favor of the eternal rewards of heaven. The later letter writers of the Christian church would refer to their members as citizens of heaven reminding them that heaven was their true home, the earth but a place we were passing through.

As we heard in our reading from James Ford, contemporary ministers, even those of progressive stripe, disagree on where our focus should be—in the here and now of this world or in a possible afterlife. James Ford represents what has been common Unitarian theology for several hundred years when he says, “This place here, this place now, this being and nowhere else, is our true home.” That doesn’t mean that there aren’t Unitarians who believe in an afterlife or in heaven; it simply means that we have given a good deal of focus to bettering the world we live in, to creating what we can of the beloved kingdom in this life.

So how are we to understand these words of Jesus that urge us to store up treasure in heaven? What relevance might they hold for us? As one blogger (John Scalzi) wrote:

I am an agnostic of the “I’m almost certain God does not exist, but intellectual honesty requires me to admit I just don’t know” stripe, so in a [sic] obvious, literal sense Matthew 6 can’t do much for me. I don’t pray, and for the good works I do here in this world, I don’t expect compensation in the next, because I don’t believe there is a next world. Here and now is all we have.

But I know wisdom when I see it, and the underlying wisdom of Matthew 6 is universally applicable.

OK. How so?

Well, when in doubt it never hurts to see what those who set the path of Unitarian theology had to say about it so I dug through *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson* and in volume 2 I found a sermon Emerson preached on September 6, 1829 at Second Church in Boston. It’s title? “For where your treasure is there will be your heart also.” Bingo.

Here’s what he had to say, and please excuse the rather gendered language of 1829.

The great part of mankind have no padlocked vault; no casket of gems or gold or silver have they to hide from thieves or preserve from rust...

The... treasure which belongs to every man is... all of the gifts with which God has endowed him of whatever description—whether genius, wit, birth, vigor of bone, good nature, friends, courage or skill...

But where is heaven? And how shall we lay up our labors there? Heaven is the spiritual world of the good. Heaven is not a place but the state of a holy mind. Heaven is purity of heart... Therefore to lay up your treasure in heaven it needs not that you should go out of this world... Oh no; but in the midst of it...here in the capacity of your own soul is the kingdom of heaven to be found.

It consists of making the right choice in all the alternatives that every day offers you.

No you need not go out of the earth. You are to lay up your treasure in the love of all that is truly lovely; in the veneration of all that is good.

The language may sound a bit dated to our ears, but the sentiment has lost none of its power—there is a heaven, but it is one that we are called to create. As Emerson tells us, we all have treasure in our gifts and capabilities and they are best spent in choosing the good that we can build.

So although this place here, this place now is our true home there is also another place and another now that is possible. Our challenge is to learn to live with the already and the not yet as homes in which we find beauty and comfort, to live fully into what is without losing hope of what is not yet.

We may not have a casket of gems or gold or silver, but still we all have some treasure of life in us and how we choose to spend that treasure is evidence of where our heart lives, in the world as it is or in the world as we know it can be. We all of us, regardless of gifts, regardless of material wealth, casket of gems or penniless, we all live in this same broken and bruised creation where there is beauty so tender and strong it will make you weep, where the depth of sorrow can make us squeeze our eyes tight shut. We choose every day how we will spend our gifts.

There is a new movement building that is all about how we make those choices. The other night, before the World Café discussion about the future of religious education leadership, I was talking to Jeremy Miller. He told me about a podcast he heard on effective altruism so I checked it out and ended up researching the effective altruism movement. I don't know if you have heard of it (it was the first I had), but effective altruism is the use of evidence and reason to help you do the most good you can with the resources you have. Hmmm. Reason and evidence; doing good. Sounds a little like Unitarian Universalism.

The 'altruism' part of effective altruism is not particularly new. It is simply urging everyone to understand that we have the opportunity and the power to decrease the suffering in the world by giving of our treasure. But the effective part urges us to really think about the ways in which we

use our treasures of time, skill and money, to make them have the most effect and help the greatest number of people.

When we give, either in charitable donations or through volunteering, it is certainly our hope and intention to do good. It just doesn't always turn out that well, and so we have to do some reflection and research and perhaps even some testing to figure out what will be most impactful. One of the examples cited on the website EffectiveAltruism.org is the Playpump.

In southern Africa getting water to where it is needed is a pretty big deal. It has to be carried or pumped, mostly by hand. It takes a lot of work. It is also an area where children do not have a lot of recreational opportunities. So someone got the bright idea to combine the two. Remember those old playground merry go rounds that you used to spin as fast as you could to make your friends dizzy? Well, the Playpump is a brightly colored merry go round that pumps water as it spins. What a brilliant idea right? Kids get a playground and the village gets its water pumped. How could that possibly not be a win-win?

Companies like Ford and Colgate sunk millions of dollars into the manufacture and distribution of the Playpump. Bill Clinton called it "a wonderful innovation." The only problem was it turned out to be a very bad idea indeed. One problem was that they are not the safest toys in the world. Kids fell off them and broke bones, but it gets worse. The Playpump doesn't take an initial push and then keep spinning freely like regular merry go rounds. You have to keep pushing. It takes a lot of effort and it makes the Playpump more akin to forced child labor than play. Kids simply didn't want to play with it. So it fell to the elderly women of the village to keep the candy colored wheels spinning, something that was well below their station and dignity. Further, it wasn't even a very efficient pump. To cover the water needs of a village for one day you would need to operate the Playpump for 27 hours. The best laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft agley.

So effective altruism calls us, first and foremost, to investigate how we can be effective rather than simply enthusiastic in bringing about change. It asks us to consider all the ways we use the assets at our disposal in reducing suffering through charitable giving, through the professions we choose, through our volunteer work, through what and how much we choose to consume.

There are two points to effective altruism that I particularly want to lift up. One is an emphasis on root causes. While effective altruism acknowledges the need to feed people now, it is also concerned with working to dismantle the systemic causes of poverty. While it provides medicine and care for the ill it equally supports scientific research and public health initiatives to eradicate the disease. In this way effective altruism also aligns well with Unitarian Universalism offering both charitable solutions for the immediate relief of suffering and working for lasting systemic change.

The other point that I want to lift up is a focus on the future. Effective altruism says that if we feel concern for people in other countries (i.e. those separated from us by distance), then we should feel concern for the generations of the future (those separated from us by time). Climate change, the threat of nuclear war, the unknowns of genetic engineering, the growth of new pathogens—all these are potential threats to future generations and should be our concern now.

I think that is something that is very resonant with us here today. As we have moved through the World Café conversations considering the future of religious education in this church it is clear to me that our values call us to a concern for the future. The one clear message that has emerged from our conversations is that we are committed to building for the future, to progressive religious education for ourselves and for our children, education that fosters both independence and interdependence, that builds healthy, loving views of the world that don't have to conform to prescribed doctrine but that welcome and honor each and every person. We commit here to building that capacity in order to live into the world as it is, but also to bring about the world that we know is possible.

In order for us to live these commitments we pledge our money and our time and our skills to help ourselves and to help others. Once a year we run a pledge drive to ask what you are willing to commit to this work. This is not the same thing as contributing to a charity that might have thousands or even millions of donors but in which you have no voice over how the money is spent. Here it is all up to us—to support the work but also to say what the work is. Some of our money does go to charity, but when you pledge to UUBN you are pledging to support your spiritual home and a community of people committed to caring for each other and providing a home for progressive religious ideas, a community of people committed to the already and the not yet.

Our pledge theme this year is Five to Thrive, giving 5% of your income to support this church. I know that may sound like an awful lot. The first time someone stood up in my home congregation and said he pledged 10% of his income and urged us to do so I became a little faint. I couldn't pledge 10% then, but I can now and I have in every year of my ministry. Without his invitation I might not have known that satisfaction. And so I invite you to consider whether Five to Thrive will be part of your covenant with this church.

You know money is a tool like any other. It carries no intrinsic moral weight. It can be used for good or for ill. It can be used to shame or to inspire. So here's a little bit of inspiration I came across while learning about effective altruism.

Julia Wise is a social worker. Her husband, Jeff Kaufman, is a software engineer. In 2013 their combined income was \$245,000. Yet as believers in effective altruism who feel they have an obligation to help the suffering of the world they have made a commitment to live on \$15,280 annually, just over 6% of their income. Let me be clear. They do not give 6% of their income away. They live on 6%. They give away 40%. People all over the world are joining a movement of giving. They do not seek to set aside the temporal concerns of the world, but with full awareness of those concerns, they seek to store up their treasures in heaven knowing that heaven "is the spiritual world of the good" that it "is not a place but the state of a holy mind," knowing that to live in heaven "consists of making the right choice in all the alternatives that every day offers you." For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.

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