
From Heart to Treasure and Back Again

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
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“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”
— Luke 12:34

“He was working then.”

That’s what my family says whenever someone asks about my life in the 1980s or 90s. If the question isn’t about my family, my job, or college basketball, I can’t answer it. I saw myself entirely through those roles: son, husband, father, lawyer, fan. That’s where I put my treasure.

I was goal oriented. I knew what I wanted and worked hard to get it. But I didn’t see the cost. Over time, I lost a sense of purpose. The more I became aware of my limitations -- and the more vulnerable I felt—the more tightly I clung to my goals.

I began to define myself by what others said about me, by what I achieved, by what I acquired. If you had asked, I would have said my purpose was to love God and neighbor. But my life told another story. My attachments had become more important than God. They consumed the energy meant for loving others.

The religious word for this is idolatry -- the illusion that I could build a life worth having out of things I could control. Eventually, that illusion collapsed and brought me to my knees.

And it was then I discovered that grace is the only power strong enough to free me from my attachments.

The Pattern in Scripture

My story is hardly unique. It runs like a thread through Scripture: in the garden of Eden, in the wilderness wanderings of the Exodus, in Paul’s words about sin, deliverance, and life in the Spirit.

My seminary professor Luke Timothy Johnson describes it this way:

“The natural tendency of human freedom is toward idolatry; freedom from idolatry is enabled by God’s offer of grace; sin is the refusal, and faith is the acceptance of that gift.”

But, Johnson warns, faith is never final. Every act of obedience tends to harden into another plateau where we come to rest -- another form of idolatry. The life of faith, he says, is “a constant oscillation between idolatry and obedience ... a process that continues until death.”

Spiritual formation, then, is not a destination but a process.

The spiritual writer Gerald May summarizes it beautifully: God creates us for love and freedom; attachments hinder us; grace saves us; and through it all, God longs for us and we long for God.

How the Heart Works

This is what I hear when Jesus says: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

I hear emphasis on the heart. Not a threat, but an observation: “This is how the heart works.”

We treasure something -- a person, a belief, a goal, even a fear -- and our hearts follow. Not by choice, but by

design. Our hearts go wherever we place our attention, energy, and longing.

The life of faith, then, does not begin with effort. It begins with seeing.

Gerald May explains:

“Our longing for the true God often lies submerged for months, years, even decades, while our conscious energies chase satisfaction elsewhere. Every so often, that longing resurfaces—graciously and uncomfortably nudge us: You know this isn’t really what you want. Often, it’s not until we reach rock bottom that we begin to reclaim our true desire.”

When that moment comes, we see our attachments for what they are. We hear God’s invitation: “Make your home in me, as I make mine in you.”

Like the prodigal, we come home. What we lose is not the people or things we love, but the addictive grip that turns them into idols.

The Temptation of Religious Idols

Our temptation, of course, is to trade one attachment for another -- even religious ones. Doctrines, Scripture, sacraments: all are essential means of grace.

But they are not God.

When clung to as ends in themselves, they become obstacles to the freedom God offers.

The homeward path requires trust. Grace gives us what we need when we need it. Sometimes, the skies clear -- just for a moment -- and we glimpse what has been there all along: our deepest center, what Scripture calls the heart. It is the meeting place with God, the place where we discover our unity with all creation.

Coming Home

So if our treasure has led our hearts into anxiety or sadness, how do we come home?

Not by trying harder.

Not by shaming ourselves.

Not by swapping one idol for another.

The way home is awareness and surrender.

As Gerald May says: “The spiritual life begins with desire, it deepens with grace, and it grows in surrender.”

We begin by noticing what we have been treasuring and holding it in the light of love. We let go—not by yanking our hand away, but by allowing love to loosen our grip. We place our treasure in what endures: presence, stillness, honesty, compassion, trust, and God.

We don’t fix the heart. We return to it.

A Story

A young priest once came to spiritual direction during a retreat I was helping lead. She said, “I believe in God, but I don’t feel anything anymore. Prayer feels dry. Life feels flat.”

As we talked, it became clear how much of her energy was going into proving herself -- at work, in friendships, even in her faith. Her treasure had drifted into effort and image.

Then she told me about a moment on a hike the day before. Her voice softened. Her eyes lit up. It wasn’t a “religious” moment, but it was real: quiet, still, wordless. A kind of homecoming.

That was her heart following her treasure, though she hadn’t recognized it until then. Sometimes, the way forward is simply paying attention.

A Practice

Here's one way to live this out:

Once a day, sit quietly.

Let your breath be steady.

Ask yourself:

- What have I been treasuring today?
- Where has my heart gone?
- Is it restless or settled?
- What am I clinging to?

Then pray:

God, I offer this to you.

I offer myself to you --

you who treasure me more than I know.

That's enough.

No performance.

No fixing.

Just presence.

Just grace.

Church at Its Best

Now imagine a community living this way:

- People who admit their attachments without shame.
- People who return to presence -- not to be "good," but to be real.
- People who treasure what cannot be lost.

That is Church at its best. Not a club of experts, but a fellowship of the heart.

So hear Jesus again: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

This is not a threat. It is an invitation -- an invitation to notice, to return, to let go, and to trust.

It is an invitation to place our treasure where grace already waits.

And in doing so, to discover that our hearts were never far from home.

Amen.