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"Wherever Your Treasure Lies There Also Your Heart Will Be"

By
Mark Pranaitis, C.M.

Whenever scripture is used as a point of departure for a talk or article, I think it is important to review the meaning of the scriptural text in its context lest one be guilty of using the phrase or story as a proof text. Not wanting to be found guilty of this capital sin, I will begin with a few thoughts on the meaning of the phrase which makes up the title of this article.

The sixth chapter of Saint Matthew's Gospel is in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, which serves as a short course in the teachings of Jesus. He already has attracted attention by healing and preaching. Now, with a large crowd gathered, Jesus begins to lay out the conditions for discipleship. Those who wish to follow him must be open to a different world. A world in which the sorrowful are blessed, anger against someone severely punished and enemies are to be loved. In this sermon, Jesus teaches his disciples to call God "Our Father," to fast and to be faithful in marriage, that is, that divorce is not part of his vision. He goes on to instruct them to avoid judging each other and to recognize that their own measure will be used to measure themselves. This new world of Jesus will be exciting, if only for how different it will be from the day-to-day lives of those first disciples.

In the midst of this sermon, Jesus tells his disciples not to spend their lives building up a treasure of earthly goods. He says that instead, they should store up heavenly treasure, which neither moths nor rust corrode nor thieves break in and steal.[1] Jesus then goes on to connect treasure and heart which, ultimately, is the reason why he warns against earthly treasure. He wants our hearts to be focused on the Father, not distracted by the things money can buy. It is our hearts, after all, that connect us to God, not our titles, money, jewels or accomplishments.

Jesus knows that the disciples who are listening to him are going to help spread the Good News. He wants them to be prepared, and this article is designed to prepare them for what is to come. First of all, however, they must commit themselves to living this new way. He knows that his values are not the values of the world and that his

[1] Matthew 6:20.

followers will be caught in that tension. All the more reason their hearts must be converted to his way, away from the attractions and distractions of the treasures of the world. Those treasures promise security, comfort and power. None of these are marks of a disciple whose commitment will be evidenced by openness and dependence.

Call to mind some of the images of treasure. I think of pirates and ocean depths, strong boxes with heavy locks, safes behind oil paintings. Think of all the things that treasure could buy: gracious homes, fast cars, servants, airplanes and all manner of comforts. Imagine for a moment that you could live the life of the rich. Imagine yourself a Carnegie, Vanderbilt, Astor or Gates. Would it not be wonderful, just for a moment, to live a life filled with all that is lovely and comfortable?

When I was a little boy (and I am not far beyond that now), I dreamed of finding a treasure. I was certain that one day I would discover what someone else had forgotten. I hoped that in our attic where we stored old rugs and Christmas decorations, I would find a small box in the corner, missed by everyone else, and in that box were gold coins worth a fortune. During my real estate development years, every time I tore down a plaster wall, I hoped that some long-ago owner had hidden a fortune for safekeeping. It never happened and I have torn down many, many walls.

The treasure bug still bites me every now and then. When the lottery prize gets very high, I am tempted to buy a ticket. If I do buy one, I promise that every penny will go to Neighborhood Partners (a not-for-profit developer of affordable housing I began while living in Denver) because it would be great if Partners never had to worry about money again. Would it not be great if we never had to worry about money for our schools, churches, hospitals, and service agencies again?

When I ask that, my heart answers and I know that it would not be great. I wish it would be. I would love to win many millions of dollars. How easy that would make my life. No more phone calls, letters and meetings begging more and more money for truly good works. No more schmoozing at parties and trying not to consider the other 501 (c) 3s as the competition which are after the same scarce dollars to fund their truly good works too. (What happened to all the wealth we are creating?)

My heart knows that this is not the way forward. This is not the way of Vincent and Louise. It is not God's way. If every organization

that does good work for people had all the money it needed, we would miss the all-important relational dynamic. We would not be working to change people's hearts as we asked for their dollars so that the poor can have the food, clothing, housing, health care and education they deserve.

Relationships are what we value instead of earthly treasure. This is where the real work of Jesus, Vincent, Louise and Frederick is done. It is in relationships that hearts are changed, both our own hearts and those to whom we relate.

Jesus' vision is for us to be profoundly, madly in love with God. This is a value, our relationship with God. If that is the case, what are our practices? How much time do we spend aware of this fundamental relationship? How much effort do we give to developing it? How much time and effort are invested in this relationship by the organizations for which we work? Are we at least challenged by Jesus' vision even if we always fall short of it? Do we and our organizations long for the conversion to Jesus' vision?

Stories of conversion inspire us to live deeper lives. There is a temptation to consider conversion as a momentary experience or a once-in-a-lifetime event. This is not the common experience. Even people who have dramatic moments (Saint Vincent and Saint Louise among them) spend the rest of their lives struggling to live into the vision they were given in that peak moment. There is an ongoing nature to conversion.

Les Miserables, the great novel by Victor Hugo, now a popular musical, centers on the conversion of Jean Valjean. It is a great story of conversion, not merely from sin to grace, but from isolation to relationship. Do not we all find a connection with this story? That is how it is with stories of conversion.

Recall the story, how the newly appointed bishop of Digne, after visiting the hospital for indigents, exchanges his large house for the hospital which was too small to hold all the patients. Then, living in his new, humble quarters, where his only luxuries were some pieces of family silver, the bishop is visited by Jean Valjean, newly released from prison. The bishop offered Valjean dinner and a bed. During the night, Valjean rose, grabbed most of the silver and stole off into the night only to be caught by the police who returned him to the bishop's house. The bishop explained that he had given the silver to Valjean as a gift. Then, in front of the police and his befuddled housekeepers, he gave Valjean the candle holders, worth more than the forks and knives,

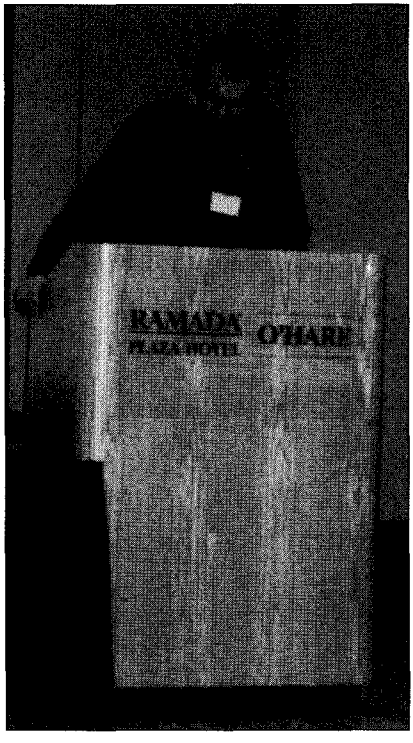
delivering them with this line, "Do not forget, ever, that you have promised me to use this silver to become an honest man. Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to what is evil, but to what is good. I have bought your soul to save it from black thought and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God." The rest of the book, some 1,000 pages, tells the story of Valjean's new life.

Perhaps we can take a closer look at this story. The bishop himself had to be converted (symbolized by his trading his house for the too small hospital) and then was able to realize that the silver he held really belonged to the poor. He was then free enough to give it to the poor in the person of Valjean. The story details the bishop's struggle to realize that the silver, which he enjoyed, was not his true treasure. His joy following from his gift to Valjean is complete. His conversion was so effective in his own life that it opened Valjean's heart as well, for he went on to live a noble life using the silver to open a factory which justly employed many people and made Valjean very wealthy—permitting him to be generous to poor people. The complexity of the story prevents me from developing it even more fully as an example in this article. I reference it to make the point that conversion happens in relationship.

I suggest that as Vincentians our treasure is relationships. First among those relationships is the one we have with those who are poor, with whom we share the Good News. Our own faith grows as we share it with them and see the power of God change their hearts and our own. We grow increasingly comfortable with these brothers and sisters who live hard lives. We become less protective of the things we have and more willing to live simple lives so that they might have more of what they need, so that we might better feel our dependence upon God.

However, we are also called to be in relationship to those who are not poor. We are concerned for their conversion as well. Recall that Vincent did not want merely the money and influence of his benefactors. He wanted them to live for God as well. Could we not say that by using their money he was buying their souls for God just as the bishop did in *Les Miserables*? Did Vincent not long that through their gifts the rich would see poor people as the presence of God in their midst?

In my own thinking about great wealth, I make the erroneous assumption that wealth brings freedom. However, those who are not poor are not necessarily more free than those who are poor. Given that



Dale Whitten, moderator and facilitator, prepares to begin a session.

one of the signs of the reign of God is the captives being set free,[2] perhaps it is time for those of us who are held captive by gated communities, automatic garage door openers, burglar alarms and caller IDs to realize that our freedom will be realized when we are in relationship with those from whom we are tempted to protect ourselves.

We need not look far to find them. We are already in relationship to them. (How dynamic that relationship is raises other questions.) They work in the schools, hospitals, service agencies, churches which we administer. The poor are those who mop the floors and shovel the snow. They sometimes work at night when we are home comfortably asleep. They are the ones who do not have e-mail.

We need not look far for our treasure. But the challenge of recognizing those who are poor and building our own relationship with them while also building a bridge between those who are poor and those who are not is a sizable one. Does not the word treasure suggest that it will be large, making the effort very much worthwhile?

His grace will never fail you; on the contrary, it will abound in your soul in proportion to the adversities you encounter and your determination to overcome them with His same grace. God never allows us to be tempted beyond our strength.

(Saint Vincent de Paul, letter to Mademoiselle Champagne, 25 June 1658)

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[2] Luke 4:18.

I ask Our Lord to make known to you the place and manner in which He wants you to serve Him to assure your salvation. Have no fear that He will not take care of you and what concerns you if you truly seek His glory...Put your trust in His goodness and offer yourself frequently to Him that He may accomplish His good pleasure in and through you.

(Saint Vincent de Paul,
letter to Monsieur Moiset, 10 July 1658)