

“Looking In”

October 11, 2020

A Wonder-Full Life series – Livestream

These are hard words from Jesus about our obsession with stuff and our desire for more. These are challenging words from Jesus – an ultimatum given and a choice to make: God or money? Whom or what will we serve?

There’s no dancing around it or trying to make like Jesus isn’t clear. There’s no need to try to dilute what Jesus says here. Following Jesus requires something of us. We don’t get to do whatever we want when we live under Jesus’ authority as Lord and Savior. We can’t serve two masters. We can’t say we love God and love money more. We can’t focus all of our energy of getting. Jesus says there’s got to be some giving.

Last week, we were looking back at what we learned early on about money and giving. Was it secret (never talked about) or private (kept within family boundaries)? Was it a source of worry and conflict – or viewed as a tool for doing good? What are the lessons we want to keep – and what do we need to let go of in order to embrace God’s vision for our lives?

The connection between finances and faith – money and meaning – isn’t new. If there was ever a question whether we could separate them, Jesus is clear that we can’t. Stewardship of our whole lives – how we manage all of God’s gifts - is tied to what we believe about ourselves and how we understand our relationship to God. We’re accountable to God for what we do have, and Jesus reminds us that what we do with what we have is just as important as what we say about God.

So today we’re looking in. Sometimes it takes a tragic event or time of hardship for us to look inside ourselves. That’s partly what happens to George Bailey – with the help of angel Clarence. George is convinced that his life doesn’t matter, but he can’t see the impact until Clarence shows him.

Sometimes looking in means becoming more aware of what brings us joy and what we dread. For some, this year has pushed us to consider what’s most important to us – recognizing the value of relationships with family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, and even strangers who we feel more connected to because we’re all in this together, though we’re not all affected in the same way.

Big life questions are in front of us: What’s my purpose? How do I make my life meaningful? What do I do with my time, energy, and money to make a lasting difference?

Looking in means focusing more closely on motivation. What's important to me? Why do I give? What compels me to give? What pushes me to spend our time and energy and money? It's looking at the human and heart side of giving. We want to move away from fear and shame that so often surrounds money issues – even giving issues – and move toward a healthier vision that falls in line with what Jesus says.

Jesus pushes us to see that what the world says is most valuable isn't what really lasts. Jesus challenges us to go deeper and recognize that the state of our heart matters. It's not just what we give, but why we give. Matt Skinner writes, "righteousness encompasses the focus and state of mind that motivates and sustains one's actions." If we want to be in right relationship with God, we have to look inside.

What are our values? Our giving should serve what we value. When Jesus says, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also," we're challenged to examine where we spend our money, time, and energy. One person commented as we planned this series that "if it's not a blessing, then it's a waste of time." While we may not love everything we have to do, how can we frame our lives with an attitude of blessing – celebrating God's blessings and sharing those blessings with the world?

Jesus cares about our hearts and calls us to be fully devoted to him. And even if we want to lead with our hearts, hoping that our treasure will follow accordingly, we have to hear Jesus - our hearts usually follow where our treasure is.

Every time I hear Jesus talk about treasures on earth, I think about my own closets and storage areas – too much stuff. And I always look up the stats on the self-storage industry in the U.S. It's taken a hit this year, but I read that it's a \$39 billion industry. That's a lot of places to store our stuff!

Our real treasure isn't in what we have or what we can get because it doesn't last; our real treasure is in what we receive from God who is gracious and generous and how we can follow God's model of grace and generosity. Jesus reminds us that what we have ultimately belongs to God who created us, who gave us gifts to share with the world, and who calls us to be generous with all that we have as a reflection of God's own nature. It's not about having all we want, but wanting what we have and then living gratefully and generously. That's the abundant life that Jesus offers.

So, for our part, looking in requires two important practices. First, we have to **pay attention**. If we look at our calendar, we can see where we spend our time and energy. Maybe we see a calendar that's too full with no time for rest and renewal – or maybe there's some time to offer in service to what's important to us.

If we look at our checkbook or credit card statement or whatever way we track our finances, maybe we see a balanced budget that includes giving and saving. For some, there may not be a budget to follow to show what we have and what we spend –

that's a first step. It was just recently that our son, Luka, was working on a Scout merit badge for personal finance. Looking at income and expenses was eye-opening for him. Perhaps our budget shows that we've swiped our cards too many times or written too many checks or used up what we have. And in the end, we're not satisfied by doing more or spending more.

Second, after paying attention, we have to **live with intention**. We have to make it a point to examine our hearts up against what Jesus says. If you're someone who has been known to engage in "retail therapy," it might be good to figure out why. Is there something about buying and having that makes you feel more secure? How could you move away from that tendency and instead adopt a new focus – considering gratitude when you feel compelled to go shopping? Think about how that kind of intentionality might transform our lives!

P.T. Barnum is credited with saying "Money is a terrible master, but an excellent servant." As Jesus says, money can serve God's purposes, but we can't allow it to control us. How do we pay attention and live with intention to order our lives so that money is a tool we use and a blessing we share? Jesus knows that trying to serve God and money and maybe even more than those two doesn't work because our hearts can't be fully devoted to God. God asks for our full devotion so that we can experience God's full blessing. And that's what we miss – the blessing of gratitude and the joy of generosity.

And our faith is incarnational. It's not simply what we say, but it's lived out in our actions of everyday life. We show our faith in Jesus by how we live – how we spend time, energy, and money. It's a freeing thing to give with joy and gratitude – not because we feel guilt or pressure or fear. That's God's vision for us.

This week, you'll receive a mailing inviting you to make a faith commitment to this congregation for the coming year. I hope you're inspired – literally led by the Holy Spirit – to look in and understand your "why?" – why you give and why it matters. Why does the ministry and mission of Lake Harbor matter to you? I hope that we all pay attention and live with intention so that this is a spiritual practice – not just something we do every year.

If you've been making a faith commitment for many years, I hope you'll continue. If you've never made a faith commitment, I hope you'll start. This is about all that we have to offer - prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness as the Body of Christ. Our commitment makes a difference every day. Thanks be to God. Amen.