

**Deuteronomy 26:1-11      Luke 12:32-48      March 23, 2014**  
**Third Sunday in Lent**  
*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

## **THE RIGHT STUFF**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

Glenn Adsit was a Lutheran missionary in China at the time of the revolution. Although he tried not to attract the attention of the government officials, eventually he and his family were put under house arrest.

One day, soldiers came to their door and told them they were being deported to America. As the family began to rejoice, one of the soldiers said, “You can take 200 pounds with you.”

The family had been in China for years. How would they decide what to take and what to leave? They carefully took stock of everything — a favorite vase, a new typewriter, all of Glenn’s books. They packed and re-packed, weighed and re-weighed. Finally, they got it down to exactly 200 pounds.

When the soldiers returned, one of them asked the Adsit family, “Are you ready to go?” “Yes,” they said.

“Did you weigh everything?” asked the soldier. “Yes,” they said, “200 pounds, exactly.”

“Did you weigh the kids?” asked the soldier. “No, we didn’t,” said the parents. The soldier told them, “Weigh the kids.”

Suddenly, the favorite vase, the new typewriter, all of the books became nothing more than stuff — even trash.<sup>1</sup>

Sixteen years ago yesterday, Nancy and I held a yard sale on the front lawn of the manse in Roanoke Rapids, NC. We sold LOTS of stuff that day, including our refrigerator, as we got ready to move to Wallace. When the moving company people finished loading the van the next Thursday, we packed up the car and headed down I-95. On the way, we talked about how lean our household was after cleaning out and selling so much stuff. Well, that was sixteen years ago — our “stuff” isn’t so lean any more!

In July 2002, Cheryl and I moved our offices from the Currie Building to the manse, in anticipation of the beginning of construction on the new building. My new study was in what used to be the guest room in the manse. A carpenter had built a beautiful set of bookshelves along the western wall of the room, as well as in the room’s closet. There seemed to be plenty of space. Now all of the shelves and cabinets are full of “stuff.”

Do you remember George Carlin’s routine about “stuff”? It goes like this (don’t worry, I’ve edited it!): “That’s all your house is — a place to keep your stuff. If you didn’t have so much stuff, you wouldn’t need a house. You could just walk around all

the time. A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it, and when you leave your house, you've got to lock it up. You wouldn't want somebody to come by and take some of your stuff. That's what your house is — a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get more stuff. Sometimes you've got to move — got to get a bigger house. Why? No room for your stuff anymore."

I picked out my sermon texts for February, March, and April about two months ago. The sermons have been about some of the most important characteristics of our Reformed Presbyterian theology and way of life. When I started to work on today's sermon at the beginning of the week, I read the text I had listed in the newsletter — Luke 12:41-48 — and thought to myself, "Why did I pick *these* verses?" I even considered preaching from a different biblical text. Finally, I decided, no, I would stick with what I originally selected.

However, I backed up a few verses in Luke 12, to verse 35. OK, that helped a little bit. So, I backed up a little farther, to verse 32 — and now verses 41-48 made more sense in that context. Actually, I could have backed up even more — to verse 22 or even all the way back to verse 13. You see, all of these verses — from 13 through 48 — have to do with "stuff."

\* The story in Luke 12:13-21 is about a rich man who had lots of "stuff" that he wanted to keep to himself. The story ends with this admonition: "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

\* Jesus' teachings in Luke 12:22-31 sound like Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. He tells his followers not to worry so much about the "stuff" of life — "what you will eat, what you will wear." The story ends with this admonition: "Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well."

\* Today's sermon text begins with a wonderful promise that we often overlook, because we're so anxious about what the very next verse means for our lives and our "stuff." Verse 33 says, "Sell your possessions, and give alms." But verse 32 assures us (and is the background for everything that follows): "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

Listen to the bookend verses 32 and 48 as I read them with nothing in between: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom . . . From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded." *The Message* version puts it this way: "Don't be afraid of missing out. You're my dearest friends! The Father wants to give you the very kingdom itself . . . Great gifts mean great responsibilities; greater gifts, greater responsibilities!"

In today's Prayer of Confession, we asked God to forgive us for our failure to be good stewards of creation, good stewards of the gospel, good stewards of God's spiritual gifts. "Stewardship" is often heard as nothing more than a fancy church word for "fund raising." You know, we've got to pay the bills . . . We've got to meet the bottom line. Well, yes, that's part of stewardship, because money is part of the "stuff" of life — just like heat and air, lights, sheet music, printing the bulletins, as well as offerings for hun-

gry children and bicycles for Zambia and sending teenagers to the Montreat Youth Conference. But “stewardship” in its broadest biblical sense includes *all of life* — creation, the gospel, spiritual gifts, money, time, talents.

These stories from Luke 12 are really about “the right stuff” — God’s kingdom, heavenly treasure and right relationships, faithful living and active watching and service in response to God’s good gifts. I often use an online resource called “The Craft of Preaching, the Working Preacher.” In particular, I like to read articles written by a man named David Lose, who is a professor of Biblical Preaching at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. I’ve even e-mailed him before and thanked him for his thought-provoking comments and ideas about biblical texts.

Here’s something he had to say about these stewardship verses from Luke 12: “Anchored by the promise that God wants to give us all good things, we can hear these commands and injunctions differently. God wants us not to be beset by worries, to keep our priorities straight, not to be consumed by greed or love of those things that do not bring real happiness. Rather, God wants us to have and enjoy and share the abundant life that comes from authentic community and right relationship with God and each other. As for being on the lookout for the coming kingdom, Jesus doesn’t want us to miss when God comes in ways that might surprise us — in generosity instead of accumulation, in community instead of looking out for ourselves, in vulnerability and relationship rather than in strength. It’s easy to miss the God who comes in love and grace, you see, when all we expect is law and punishment.”<sup>2</sup>

Luke 12:34 is one of those Bible verses that sounds good even when it is misquoted. Listen: “For where your heart is, there your treasure will be also.” That sounds reasonable, even logical, doesn’t it? But Jesus knew our lives don’t work that way — and that’s *not* what the Bible verse says. Instead, it says, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” These stories from Jesus in Luke 12 tell us to watch carefully and prayerfully what we treasure in life. It’s easy to be distracted by all of the “stuff” we accumulate, but it’s not always “the right stuff.”

Jesus talks about “the right stuff” in a life of stewardship that takes in everything we have and everything we do and everything we are — and a part of that is how our money and possessions reflect our priorities. Here’s something interesting I came across in an article online called “The Mirrors of Your Checkbook.”

“This ‘money mirror’ has two sides. The first reflects a fairly clear and concrete image: It shows you where your money goes, and speaks volumes about where your current priorities are pointing you. A careful review of your checkbook register (or credit card statements) can very quickly illuminate where the majority of your money (and by extension, your energy) is being expended, and where it is being withheld. This, in turn, can tell you a lot about where certain components of your life may be out of whack.

“The second aspect of the money mirror is similar — but a bit more conceptual and complex. It involves applying a checkbook metaphor to the distribution of your time, activities, and life energy. This can show you what kind of value you place on

yourself — your focus, attention, and skills. More specifically, a review of this metaphorical, energetic-checkbook register can help you identify areas in which you are investing yourself successfully, as well as places where you may be ‘spending’ yourself unwisely. This aspect of your money mirror can reveal beliefs, relationships, activities, and priorities that may be creating energetic overdrafts and sinking you into energetic debt.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus’ teachings, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” and “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded” can be a “stewardship mirror” for our lives and for our church. Jesus’ words reveal our beliefs, our relationships with God through him, our activities, priorities, and ministries. Are we storing up “the right stuff” in our Christian lives and in the life of our church?

On the night of the great Chicago fire, October 8, 1871, the evangelist, Dwight L. Moody, preached on “What Will You Do With Jesus?” The worship service was disrupted by the sound of sirens. Moody dismissed the congregation and everyone rushed to try to save their homes and possessions. He did the same thing, but he lost everything.

He and his family found refuge with Horatio Spafford, who wrote the much-beloved song, “It Is Well With My Soul.” Reflecting on his loss, Moody said the fire had taken everything from him but his reputation and his Bible. When a friend said to him, “Moody, I hear you lost everything!” he opened his Bible to Revelation 21:7 and said, “Well, you understood wrong. I have a good deal more than I lost!” Then he read the Bible verse, which says, “Those who overcome will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.”<sup>4</sup>

Brothers and sisters, we have been given much from God, most especially salvation in his only Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. As we think about how we will respond to God’s great gift, let us think about where our treasure truly is — in God himself — so our hearts will be there also.

***Let us pray: Almighty God, we thank you for all the gifts you have given us: our lives, our loved ones, all that we have and all that we are. Most of all, we thank you for Jesus, your Son and our Redeemer, who came among us to show us the way to eternal life. Jesus was the perfect steward of your gifts, showing that complete trust in you is necessary, and that giving of self is a most important part of following Him. May the offerings of our time, our talents, and our material resources be made in the same spirit of sacrifice that Jesus taught us by his life and death for us. Amen.***

<sup>1</sup>Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories* (Danvers, MA: Chalice Press, 2001), pp. 22-23.

<sup>2</sup>David Lose, “The Heart of the Matter,” at “Craft of Preaching, Dear Working Preacher,” found at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

<sup>3</sup>“The Mirrors of Your Checkbook,” at [www.experiencelife.com](http://www.experiencelife.com)

<sup>4</sup>Warren Wiersbe, “Meet Mr. Moody Part 2,” at [www.2prophetu.com](http://www.2prophetu.com)