

STEWARDSHIP I

November 4, 2018

*Matthew 13:44-46:*

***“Above All Other Things”***

*Pilgrim Lutheran Church  
2155 North Oakland Avenue  
Decatur, Illinois 62526*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Jimmy was digging around in the freezer and ran across a frozen turkey. He couldn't remember the last time they bought a turkey. For fifteen years they had been going to their son's house for Thanksgiving. So he called upstairs to his wife Melissa, "Did you know we have a turkey in the freezer?" Melissa responded, "It must be at least fifteen years old. Do you think it's any good?" "I wouldn't eat it," Jimmy said. "Let's donate it to the church."

A cringe worthy illustration isn't it? Sad to say, it kind of captures the way in which a lot of people think of the church. What should be most important is often not really important at all. Moses says in our Old Testament lesson for this morning: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might (Deuteronomy 6:5)." And it shouldn't be a burdensome command when we consider the extent of God's love for us! With the cross of calvary in mind, one would think that Jesus would be **Above All Other Things**. Truth is, he's frequently, at best, an afterthought.

Years ago, there was an article about a Lutheran church in a major metropolitan area in Asia. At the time of the offering, the pastor spoke to the assembly of believers mixed with many visitors:

Now we come to the time when we bring our offerings to the Lord. With all respect, I should say to our visitors that this is not a collection of money. This is not a collection for charity. Those who are not Christians are not permitted to contribute to this offering. This is a privilege, a spiritual and holy ritual for those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and are baptized. This is their opportunity to respond to God's love and grace. It is their opportunity to fulfill their loving obligation as the children of God as they return part of the money they have received from God to build the church and reach out to the world. Again, those who are not Christians are not permitted to contribute to the offering.

You have to admit, it's a straightforward statement isn't it? The Bible often speaks about offerings which are unacceptable. First of all, God does not want offerings from those who do not believe in order to support the church, as it says in 3 John 7: "For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles." Secondly, Paul writes in regard to believers: "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7)." Giving is not motivated by guilt. Rather, it is an exercise of one's faith. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has loved us with an everlasting love. We love because he first loved us. God does not need our money, but provides a way by which we may express our love toward him in the spiritual discipline of stewardship. Only a Christian can bring a true offering of praise and thanks to God!

Our problem is that we often have a view of the church as a great receptacle for old leftovers and afterthoughts. It shows a lot about what we value and what we don't value. **Jesus Above All Other Things**? Not really, unless we look bad. Besides, we have a lot of other things to be concerned about. We have this, that, and the other thing. Indeed, we are often on a quest for ourselves. Of course, the Lord gives much to take care of us, but this becomes a problem when we place our fear, love, and trust in this rather

than Christ, and thereby lose sight of our final destination. That was certainly the mistake of the rich man. Remember the parable in Luke 12:16-21?

And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

You will notice that the rich man was living for himself and not for Christ. Everything that he was thinking and doing was not with an understanding of his Savior **Above All Other Things**. Instead, the rich man had exchanged eternal treasure for momentary treasure and paid the price. You and I need to see things correctly and repent where we should repent, for there is the attitude of the rich man in all of us. It is very easy to be consumed with ourselves.

This morning, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ reminds us that if we are left to ourselves, we will perish. So much for our supposed accomplishments. Apart from Christ we are nothing and have nothing. What good do we have that we have not received? That is the bottom line. In Christ, we have been given the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. In Jesus we have it all! By his undeserved love, through the faith which has been worked in us by the Holy Spirit, we have been changed. As it says in Romans 6:6, "We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin." Now that the love of God has touched our lives, and our many sins have been forgiven, we are supposed to die to ourselves and look toward our neighbor and God.

Since we have the greatest treasure ever given - since we have absolutely everything in Jesus - we are enabled to sacrifice even momentary needs and wants. Nothing is more important than what we have in our Savior. As the Gospel lesson made perfectly clear: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." The point is a powerful one. The joyful man sold everything. He was more than willing to give it all up in order to possess the real treasure that lasts. This is the way it should be for each and everyone of us. What our Savior gives is truly, really **Above All Other Things**, for what he gives is himself. Nothing can ever be more important than that which he gives.

Is our response to him really a 15 year old frozen turkey? I should think not. One would think that with the gift he gives, it should well up within us a desire to give the very best of what we have - even ourselves if we have very little. What is really more important than Jesus? For those who believe in the blood-bought payment for sins and the gift of eternal life, there is nothing that is more important. Motivated by the good news of our salvation, we gladly look for opportunities to serve him in anyway we can. Giving to him and the church is only one way. In the case of monetary support, the apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, "Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia,

so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper..." Paul is talking about systematic giving in keeping with one's prosperity. That is what we do here at Pilgrim. The last thing that we would want to do is ever ask a visitor or an unbeliever to support the church. Instead, we carefully set aside a sum of money for the Lord and his kingdom.

And when things get in the way of our willingness to sacrifice to God and those who are truly in need, we have to pause and examine ourselves. We must be careful that we do not find ourselves placing more value on ourselves than on Christ and his ultimate revelation to others. Remember that Christ was willing to give up everything for us. More than that, he did so!

A number of years ago there was a terrible earthquake in Alaska. The city of Anchorage was devastated. A number of people wrote to the Governor and demanded that he do this and that for them. They outlined the suffering that they had endured, and demanded that the state do something. Later, the governor appeared on television and reported that among all of the demands, he had also received in the mail a letter from a young boy who had written on a 3x5 card and had taped to it two nickels. He had written these words: "Use this wherever it is needed. If you need more, let me know."

Sometimes children really put things into perspective don't they? It reminds me of the widow who put in the temple box everything she had. It was a small amount in comparison to the rest, but it was from the heart and it demonstrated that she was rich in Christ.

Luther once said: "to put it very briefly, God does not want us to serve money and possessions. Nor does he want us to worry. But he does want us to work and leave the worry to him. Let him who has possessions be the master of these possessions."

When you pause and think about it, it does boil down to a fairly basic question: do you, in Christ, have control of your possessions, or do your possessions have control over you? Or, maybe we can ask: Who is your God? Who do you serve? In the words of Christ, "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money (Matthew 6:24)."

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott