

Scripture: Exodus 20:15; Luke 12:32-34

Sermon Title: "Not Worth Stealing"

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Today we are continuing our journey through the Ten Commandments as we consider the eighth command: "you shall not steal". And as we do this, we too consider the teachings of Jesus, as we will again be holding the question of what does this law mean for the modern day Christ follower?

Now, property and wealth, in the time when the Ten Commandments were received, were seen not just as possessions but these tangible items were actually as an extension of "self". After all, it was likely gained through work or an energy output of some sort and so it represented part of you - a part of your life is in that item. Thus this commandment is not simply about the things that may get taken, it's about a violation of "self", taking a part of you and of course if anyone has ever experienced a burglary, you know how violating it can feel - to have someone in your home or in your car, or whatever the case might be - it can make one feel invaded. However, when we look at teachings of Jesus, something changes - not the call to not steal, Jesus actually quotes this and several other commandments when he is asked how one comes to inherit eternal life - so the idea of not stealing is still there, but what I believe Jesus does change is how we look at wealth, how we look at the things that we have and he redefines in some ways what treasure really is.

One particular Wednesday afternoon, while still living in Pennsylvania and serving a little country church and a small congregation, I was heading to the church for an evening council meeting - just a routine, monthly meeting. And I was always one to get there several hours early to be in the quiet of the church, the stillness of the office, and get some work done in the peace of that place. So I pulled into the parking lot, parked the car, walked into the narthex of the church. Now this church was of unique construction so I will try and paint a picture with my words for you. When you entered the church narthex, the entry way, you could either go up some stairs leading into the

sanctuary or go down some stairs, to the Fellowship Hall, Sunday school rooms, and the church office. Now, my office was actually up at the back of the sanctuary. So I went up the stairs, and was looking toward the front of the sanctuary, and as I turned right to go into my office, I noticed something was off. You see, like here, there were doors on either side of the pulpit. One door led into a storage room. The other led into what was called the sacristy, where items for worship were kept, where communion would be prepared and so on. That room had a door which led to the outside, sort of a back entrance.

Anyway, as I looked up to the front, I notice that the two doors were open. I didn't think too much of it, I figured that perhaps our sexton had been in to clean and just left them open no big deal. So I rounded the corner to go into my office, turned on the light, and I stood there frozen. My office was trashed. Filing cabinets had been busted open and emptied onto the floor. All the draws of my desk were pulled out, emptied, and thrown onto the floor.

Now, at that point, it did not quite hit me that we had been robbed. So in shock, I headed back out to the sanctuary and started toward the two doors by the pulpit to explore further. Now, here is where I should have made different life choices. I realize looking back that I should have probably exited the building and called the police. But it had not yet sunk in that this was an invasion. Yet, that's not what I did. So I went to the storage room, again it was trashed and cabinets and cupboards were emptied. I went into the sacristy and found that the window on the exterior door had been smashed and that's how someone gained access. That's when it finally hit me that we had been burglarized. So I called the police and they said someone would be there shortly.

In the meantime, I continued to explore, I know, bad life choices. I went downstairs and found that the church office window had been smashed and all the draws and cabinets there too had been ransacked. Soon the police arrived, we walked through everything together, they told me that this was likely connected with other relatively recent church

burglaries and that they probably were looking for money. Nothing, as far as we could tell, was taken. So the police finished their work, and I remained at the church, waiting for the council to arrive – remember we had a meeting that night! When they arrived, I shared with them everything that had happened and as one would suspect, they were shocked. There were feelings of being violated – this safe place, this sanctuary being used in this way, being treated like this. There was a lot of silence around the table as the weight of this situation sank in. It was getting so heavy, that something needed to happen. I felt the need to lighten the mood so that we could process and start finding our path forward and so I said, you know, if only the robbers had come to church to worship with us once or twice, they would have known that we had nothing worth stealing! And everyone smiled, a couple chuckled, and we were able to start forward from that point. Now when I said this, I was thinking of property, we were a small church, our newest computer was super old, we never kept money in the church, we didn't have fancy things cast silver and gold worth tons of money. Still, as I think back, we were rich – rich in treasures of heaven. We had a congregation, small perhaps but mighty, committed to doing justice in the world. A congregation who cared deeply for the needs of each other and for the neighbors outside the church. We were rich in love and compassion. And the best part, these riches were not worth stealing because they could never be stolen.

In our second reading today from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus encourages us to not seek earthy wealth or be defined by earthy wealth which is finite, which will not last forever, but to seek those treasures in heaven. To use the earthly treasures, not just wealth but all the gifts and abilities of ours, to invest them if you will into the work of building God's kingdom – caring for God's people – and therefore creating treasures which are not worth stealing because they cannot be stolen. When we offer care for another person, when we live out our faith in ways that bless the world around us, when we help others discover the love and grace of God, when we care for the vulnerable, for the neighbor in need, for the least of these, we are filling what Jesus referred to as the purse

that does not wear out, for these treasures can never be taken. And when our lives are defined by acts of love, care, mercy, when these are the treasures, circling back to the 8th commandment, when these are the treasures which are the extension of ourselves, we need not fear them being stolen for they can never be taken from us.

So yes, when we think of the 8th commandment, it still rings true - we should not steal. But also as a follower of Jesus, we should move away from being defined by physical things- of what we have in this world, and rather be defined by what we do to make this world more and more a reflection of the kingdom of God. The extension of "self" should not be founded solely in the tangible things we possess, but in the care that we offer into the world as we live out our faith. And in doing so, building up a treasure in heaven which is not worth stealing because it cannot be stolen. For love, care, mercy, grace, these things can never be taken, they can only be given. Think about it, love in the purest form, care and compassion, these things cannot be forced from us, but if they are to remain true and pure, they can only be freely given.

Beloved People of God, may we daily be building up treasure in heaven, founded in acts of love, of care, acts of faith, a treasure which can never be taken from us. May we define our lives by building up, in small and grand ways, the kingdom of God. May justice and mercy be the extension of "self", as we live out our faith and as we follow our Christ. So be it and may it be so. Amen.