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Spiritual Treasure

Mark 10:21

I recently saw for the first time a 1941 film called *Million Dollar Baby*. It is a comedy starring Priscilla Lane, Ronald Reagan, and May Robson. It tells the story of a wealthy older woman played by May Robson who discovers that her family's vast fortune was the result of her father swindling his business partner. The man who had been cheated was left penniless and then committed suicide. The May Robson character's first response is to worry that this man's family might find out and file suit against her. When she learns that the statute of limitations for a court action has long since expired, she is relieved but not for long. Burdened by a stricken conscience she investigates the family of the man her father cheated. She discovers that the only living descendent is a young woman played by Priscilla Lane. She learns that this young woman works in a department store, lives in a broken-down rooming house and is in love with a struggling but stubborn musician played by Ronald Reagan.

The wealthy woman decides that the only way to salve her conscience is to give the young woman one tenth of her fortune, which is one million dollars. The source of the gift and her identity are supposed to be kept anonymous but eventually the young woman finds out. When the Priscilla Lane character receives her cashier's check for one million dollars she doesn't believe it is authentic. But when the bank confirms that the check is good, she becomes ecstatic over her good fortune. But soon she becomes anxious when she discovers how this suddenly acquired wealth has changed her life. She becomes especially troubled when she realizes that her new status in life has disrupted all the relationships that are important to her. I think you can see where this is going. She can have a million dollars or she can have Ronald Reagan, but she cannot have both.

Her benefactor advises her to solve her problem by becoming part of New York's wealthy elite. A new hairdo, expensive clothes, and charming new friends should work wonders. She gives it a try. Even though she is welcomed by the high society types this does not meet her need. She quickly recognizes that she does not belong with that crowd. That's not who she is. Recognizing that her money has cut her off from that which is most important in her life, she instructs her new lawyer to give the money away. Her treasure is not the money, but her relationships with the people she loves. As the movie ends, she kisses May Robson and her socialite friends goodbye and happily jumps on the train to travel with Ronald Reagan and his new band into a very uncertain future.

It is this kind of choice that Mark describes in the 10th chapter of his gospel. There Jesus is approached by a rich young man who is looking for something more in life. We don't know whether he grew up with his wealth or whether he acquired it on his own. It is clear that he has had it long enough to know that it will not fill the emptiness of his life.

Jesus reminds the young man of the commandments by which we respond to God's love for us. The young man replies that he has lived by them. Jesus recognizes the sincerity of the young man's quest. He looks at him with compassion and tells him how to overcome his emptiness. Jesus says, "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me (Mark 10:21)." Jesus is challenging this wealthy young man to decide which relationships

will define his life. If he goes with Jesus he can no longer be defined by his wealth. If he is with Jesus his treasure will not be found in his possessions, but in serving others. He cannot have both. Mark tells us that the wealthy young man could not climb on that train with Jesus. He went away grieving.

Our annual stewardship campaign gives us an opportunity each year to reaffirm where our treasure is lies. The treasure that Jesus offers us is found where human need and the divine presence intersect. That is where we are called to serve. Our stewardship of time, talent, and treasure is one of the ways we climb on the train with Jesus.

In 1885 D. S. Johnson wrote about the challenges this church faced during the Civil War. In this part of Illinois support for the Union could not be taken for granted. There were many whose sympathies lay with the Confederacy. When the pastor Albert Hale said in a sermon that the South had no right to rebel and that supporters of the Confederacy in the North were disloyal, some very specific threats of violence were made against him and his family. The burden of living under these threats may have contributed to the death of Mrs. Hale in January of 1864.

This church was not a safe place during those years. But it was a place where people organized themselves to support victims of the conflict. In the winter of 1862-1863 word arrived in Springfield that refugees from the fighting were being transported by train from Arkansas. Several churches of Springfield and the Home for the Friendless agreed to provide food and housing for the fifty refugees who were being routed here. Johnson described what happened next:

On the way North, the number increased at every station so that when the train arrived there were three hundred. It was three o'clock on Sunday morning... the President of the Home sent word to some of the women, and they began the task of sheltering those shivering people. Notices were sent to the Churches asking assistance. Mr. Hale read the notice, at once dismissed the congregation, requesting the women to go home and spend the day in cooking and getting clothing ready for the refugees. He himself hitched up his horse and wagon and drove from house to house collecting loads of bedding and clothing all day.

It is needless to say that when night came every one of those sufferers was comfortably cared for. The noble deeds of peace and charity wrought by our women during those times of suffering and sorrowing, well match the heroisms and sacrifices of battle-fields.¹

The treasure of this church was never its money, its building, its pastor, or its choir. The treasure of this church was the infrastructure of caring that had been so carefully assembled during the first thirty years of its existence. It is that spiritual treasure which embraces us today and invites us to climb aboard.

Endnotes

1. Address of D. S. Johnson, *Second Presbyterian Church Historical Data*, Volume I, C. L. Conkling, pages 168-169, 183-184.