

“Treasure Ship” based on II Corinthians 4: 1, 6-15

Preached by Rev. Jonathan New

First Congregational Church (UCC), Burlington, VT — February 19, 2012

Occasionally, while preparing my sermon, coincidences arise that I’ve learned not to ignore. Like this week. Last Sunday, the church’s youth ably explored the topic of treasure. And as I prepared this Sunday’s sermon I remembered my first here, almost exactly a year ago, also on Transfiguration Sunday. I began it with a passage from *Treasure Island* and the treasure lust the story’s main characters have as they pore over the map that will eventually lead them to where X marks the spot. I went on to say that, though we may long for a good map that takes us to destinations of our choosing, the Disciple’s Map is more like the maps of old that show terra incognita, the uncharted areas that indicate that the disciple’s journey is always uncertain and risky; no X to mark the spot.

Well, it’s Transfiguration Sunday again, and this time the lectionary pairs that story with a text about — you guessed it — treasure. Paul writes: “For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of the darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus” and that “we have this treasure in earthen vessels.” God has caused light to shine in our hearts, Paul says, and it is a treasure. That light is Jesus and the gospel he proclaimed. So, the treasure we have is the light of the good news of God’s love that shines in our hearts.

One of the inspiring things about Youth Sunday was that our young theologians reflected on this church as treasure. Holly Gauding said, “In Luke it says, ‘For where your treasure is, there will be your heart also,’” and commented, “This church is a treasure and is a place that will always be part of my heart.” She reminds us that the church helps give substance to the treasure that is the good news shining in our hearts and that, because of this, it, too, is a treasure of great worth.

We can see it, they say, in what we do, such as providing service experiences. Holly, spoke of how the teaching opportunities she’s had through church school, in Vermont, and around the world helped her realize that she wants to be a teacher. Nathaniel Young, speaking of his service experience, said being surrounded by people who love and care for me “formed me into the person that I am today.” What kind of person is that? The kind who concludes by saying, “I believe I can bring a world of change for these boys and girls [I worked with in Boston] as well as to the wider community, and am eager for the challenge.” Similarly, Angela Elcan said that these experiences have helped her fall in love with “creating communities in which I feel I am making a difference.”

Alayna Hauke described these youth experiences and service trips as the church sending her on a sort of treasure hunt. “I know that I have found a lot of treasure through this church,” she said, “especially all the people I have met and worked with.” Angela Elcan, said her treasure is what she’s learned from the people of the church and key adults such as Lucy, Bonnie, Adrienne, and Bob. She thanked the church for its gifts of time, teaching, and a lot of fun, and concluded, “These experiences have helped me learn what I’m made from, and as I venture off into the world in front of me, I’ll always remember where my heart is; within this congregation and the communities that I’ve built connections with.”

To take a leaf out of Angela's book... [OPENS A SNAPPLE BOTTLE AND PRETENDS TO READ THE UNDERSIDE OF THE CAP] Real Church Treasure Fact #1: This church community has provided formative experiences that have opened the eyes of our youth, helped them know the power they have, inspired them to make a difference, and prompted them to consider a life's work of helping others.

They also help us see that who we are is also part of what makes this church a treasure. For Alta Viscomi, it's the fact that the church helps keep her "inner cynic at bay" and inspires her whenever she becomes disenchanted. She said, "It's hard to lose faith in humanity while watching members of our church fly to India weeks after the 2004 tsunami, or host annually the CROP and COTS walks...." In a world that seems harsh and unaccepting, this church prevents her, she said, "from doubting the ability of different cultures and people to work towards a common goal."

Holly Gauding spoke of our church's welcome, saying, for example, that our Open and Affirming exploration "bespeaks a spirit of hospitality and a willingness to live out that welcome in meaningful ways." For her, it's personal. As she said, the church "is the most welcoming place I know; it is a second family to me, a much bigger family. When I was younger I felt that I was the treasure of the church. The way I was treated made me feel very welcome and special." She concluded, "I am proud to be a member of this church, a church that welcomes and treasures so many people."

Real Church Treasure Fact #2: The church is a model for community at its best, a guide to extravagant welcome of all, an oasis in a hostile world, a tender of the fragile flames of hope.

Maggie Elder-Connors sums up. Noting that she'd spent nearly her entire life in this church family, she told us just what kind of treasure this church is for her. She spoke of her conversation with 8-year-old Bernadette who said she thought pirates were not very smart because they marked their buried treasure with an X. They agreed: "Not marking your treasure with an X would be much smarter if you wanted to keep it hidden." Maggie then said, "I often consider this church a treasure not marked with an X. It's a part of my life that few outside of the church know about and few realize has given me priceless gifts over the years."

Priceless gifts, shared out of this church's treasure chest. Many of these we all may value. But each of us has our own list of gems such as worship, music, prayer, solace, friendship, a glimpse of God in our midst. Yet I suspect we all agree with Alta who said she knows "we need solid ground beneath our feet if we want to reach higher" and that, in addition to her family and friends, it is her faith and church that form such a foundation for her.

What a treasure we have! But Real Church Treasure Fact #3: Along with this treasure goes a responsibility to remember just what this treasure is and to steward it well. Right now, church leaders are planning for the coming year, working on a new budget, thinking about what we can and should do. There are concerns about higher costs, decreased income, and using savings to cover operating expenses. There are other deep concerns, about how all this may mean we can no longer afford the level of ministry and staffing we've relied on. In short, there are worries over a scarcity of treasure that helps us be the treasure that we are and are meant to be. We've got some difficult days ahead as we discern together the best path to take. So, I urge you all to be in conversation with one another about the challenges before us. Because, again, we've got no detailed maps, no clear path before us, and plenty of uncertainty and risk.

And, as Paul says, we have this treasure in fragile earthen vessels. We're imperfect and limited, the church as an organization is, too, and we have and will make mistakes. Yet scripture affirms that our limitedness allows God's transcendent power to shine through. Moreover, it proclaims that, as Paul says, though we may be perplexed, afflicted, struck down, we will not be destroyed. God, who raised Jesus, will raise us also. And so, uncertain as things may be, we have faith that the God of resurrection will be working among and within us to offer us new life.

We have a priceless treasure — the good news of God's love and a church that's committed to making that transformative love real in a multitude of ways. This treasure isn't meant to be buried and we're not meant to be a secret treasure island. No, we're to be a kind of treasure ship: on the move and not at dock, leaving the safety of the placid harbor for the open sea, ready to share the treasure of what we've been given and who we are in places both near at hand and in distant lands. May we seek to be aware of all the treasure that we have in our keeping — what we believe, what we do, and who we are — and to discern, together and by God's Spirit, how we may most faithfully steward and share this priceless, life-giving, life-transforming treasure; faithful in putting our treasure where our hearts are.