

August 11, Ordinary 19C (Luke 12:32-40)

Jesus is the thief, and the powers of this world own the house in which we're waiting.

by [Hardy Kim](#) in the [July 31, 2019](#) issue

Luke's Jesus declares his purpose by quoting from the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Isa. 61:1; Luke 4:18). Throughout Luke's account, Jesus' concern for the poor and suffering of the world is clear.

So in chapter 12, when we hear all of Jesus' encouragements to set aside the material blessings of the world, it is difficult to understand them as literal instructions to not be concerned with things like money, food, or shelter. Particularly in the passage for this week, it seems more appropriate to resist any either/or distinction between the material benefits of the world and the blessings of God's spiritual realm. Perhaps this series on treasure, masters, and house-owners is instead about being bound to the right frame of reference or ultimate source of value. When Jesus says, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also," he is speaking of the Greek *kardia*, which William Mounce defines as "the seat of feeling, impulse, affection, desire" and "the inner and mental frame." He does not say that where your treasure is, there you will be also.

Jesus' hearers live in the real world. He does not seem to expect them to live somewhere else. But they are to feel and desire and to frame their whole existence as if they belong somewhere else.

Jesus' instruction not to collect earthly treasure might encourage us to trust in God's providence—so we can be freed to do God's will with our resources, instead of trying to save them up to provide for ourselves. The story about having our lamps ready for the master might urge us to move according to the schedule of God's coming feast, rather than to exist in a constant state of terrified vigilance or productivity (as

our commodifying and capitalist world would have us do).

And in the passage's final saying, our expectations are doubly confounded: it is Jesus who is the thief who comes unannounced, and the powers of the world are the owners of the "house" in which we temporarily exist. We must be watchfully waiting for the current order to be overthrown.

These teachings that instruct Jesus' community to live in the world but not of the world are hardly unique in scripture. But here, as elsewhere, it is hard to know exactly how to translate such teaching into meaningful action in our own lives. It is hard to draw a simple conclusion from such a passage, both because the context of these sayings is so distant from our own and because parables by their very nature cannot be understood literally. This passage requires the listener to invest a good deal of time reflecting on what it means to direct our "inner and mental frame" away from the world's values and toward that which God would have us value. We have to listen carefully to hear the purpose to which God is calling us—to receive our vocation.

Henri Nouwen is a wise teacher in the art of listening for God's calling and framing our lives by God's values. In *Spiritual Direction*, he shares this:

From the beginning of my life, two interior voices have been speaking to me: one saying, *Henri, be sure you make it on your own. Be sure you become an independent person. Be sure I can be proud of you;* and another voice saying, *Henri, whatever you are going to do, even if you don't do anything very interesting in the eyes of the world, be sure you stay close to the heart of Jesus, be sure you stay close to the love of God.*

"You are here for just a short time," Nouwen writes elsewhere in the same book, "for twenty, forty, sixty, or eighty years—to discover and believe that you are a beloved child of God. . . . Life is just a short opportunity for you during a few years to say to God: 'I love you, too.'" Perhaps Nouwen's words might help us learn to bind ourselves to the right ultimate source of value.