

Where is YOUR heart?
Sunday, Oct. 3, 2010
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Matthew 6:19-7:12

Did you see the news this week about our nation's so-called religious literacy?

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life asked several thousand Americans to take a 32-question quiz about Christianity and other world religions. You may have seen an abbreviated version in The Observer yesterday. The questions in the full version included these about Christianity:

1. Name the Four Gospels
2. Does the Bible include this saying: God helps those who help themselves?
3. Where was Jesus Born

About other faiths it asked:

4. Name the Holy Book of Islam
5. What is Ramadan?
6. Name the four noble truths of Buddhism

On average, the respondents answered half the questions correctly, not a passing score on any scale. But it gets more embarrassing from there, at least for us believers.

Atheists and agnostics – those who believe there is no God or who aren't sure – answered more questions correctly than any other group. Jews and Mormons ranked just behind them. Out of nine different categories of Christians, we mainline Protestants came in sixth, with a score just below the average of 50% right, or wrong, depending on how you choose to see it.

But here is the twist: Atheists and agnostics outsourced believers because of one thing. They knew more about world religions such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism than Christians. Regardless of whether they believe in God, it seems that atheists and agnostics have at least studied up. They may be relying on their heads to the exclusion of their hearts. But they are doing their homework.

So it seems we have work to do. Believers need to learn more about our own faith. But, we also know that we live in a world of heightening tensions across the religious

landscape, a world where one preacher wants to burn the Quran and others debate how far Muslims need to be from Ground Zero to build a mosque and community center.

So much of this tension and fear stems from emotion and flat-out ignorance, not only of other religions but also of the core principles of Christianity. Perhaps we all ought to go back to school, for our own good and that of future generations.

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So, what *do* we Christians believe?

The professor who wrote the quiz must think that some important answers to that question lie in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Two of the questions focusing on Bible content come from that important moment early in Jesus' ministry.

What is the Golden Rule? the quiz asks.

It also asks, where, if at all, these words appear in the Bible: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God?"

I agree that if you had to pick one sermon or lesson in which Jesus lays out the heart of Christian ethos, the Sermon on the Mount is the one. We might even think of it as Jesus' greatest hits album. It opens with the beatitudes, those statements that, as I said last week, proclaim the exact opposite of what Jesus' followers had come to expect from the world. The meek inheriting the earth, the hungry being filled, the persecuted receiving the kingdom of heaven. Right away, Jesus had his followers' attention.

It includes the Lord's Prayer as well as the essential passage we considered last week – Jesus' calling the disciples the "salt of the earth," set aside to preserve his movement. Just after that, Jesus refers to the disciples as the light of the world. Those who attended last week's memorial service for little Madison Dyson heard how her school principal used that phrase to describe how Madison lived, as a light to others while she was with us.

Then, as he moved toward his conclusion, Jesus summarized his message in that most memorable instruction.

"In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you;
for this is the law and the prophets." (Matthew 7:12)

Here Jesus summarizes not only that one momentous sermon but the entire gospel.

On the way to giving us the Golden Rule, however, Jesus said something else, something that speaks to us at Caldwell in particular in this season when we consider the life of discipleship.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

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As he does throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is asking his followers to make a critical distinction: Where will you put your faith? In the world? Or in the kingdom of heaven?

Here Jesus is not referring to the kingdom of heaven as a far-off after-life, something distant, nebulous that we can conveniently stuff away in the corner of our consciousness because it is unknown and unknowable. No, when he refers to the kingdom of heaven, he is talking about the here and now, as known in his ministry and what it asks of the rest of us. In me, Jesus is saying, God’s will for the world has come to pass, it has broken through. It is not here in full, but it has begun. And, he says, it can be seen even further through you, as disciples doing my work.

Jesus asks: Where will you put your heart? Where will you put your treasure?
Why does Jesus make this distinction?

In the first century – and for centuries before that – the heart was thought to be more than just the organ that pumps blood through our bodies. In ancient times, the heart was “the center of emotions, feelings, moods and passions.”¹ It was considered the “source of thought and reflection.” It was thought to host the powers of the mind, one’s intellect and wisdom. It reflected one’s “will and conscience.”

Where our heart is, then, is where we have chosen to be with our whole selves, all that we are. It is the place where we have invested our feelings. It is the place where, in our rational minds, we have decided to find our direction. It is the place that feeds us and sustains us, guides and directs us.

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Over the past three years or so, I've heard so many of you describe this church that way. Caldwell has become a place of wonder for all of us. It is a place that none of us anticipated. It has filled a hole in our lives that many didn't know was there.

It also has been a source of joyful surprise. God continues to lead us to find uses for our buildings, which, almost unbelievably, are now almost full with some kind of ministry. As important as our buildings, God is using so many of you to bring new and needed ministries to life here – ministries beyond our doors keenly focused on justice and equity and those who have less than we do.

Caldwell has also become family. Deep friendships have taken root. Old friendships have flourished here. You are a source of comfort and support to one another in difficult times, and celebration and encouragement in good times.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ said we can see glimpses of the kingdom of heaven on earth because Christ ushered it in. Jesus opened that door. Then he called his disciples – to be the salt of the earth and a light unto the world. So it is that in this one small way at this one small church, God kept open the doors and calls each of us to serve.

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In the last week, 65 members and friends of this church claimed their calling to serve God by pledging their time and talent. In the coming weeks, more will join them and our ministries will reach more people – inside and beyond the doors of this church. Thanks be to God.

Now we turn our focus to another way to respond to God. That is, with our financial resources. As we have said before, the life of discipleship has two aspects. First, we are called. Then we are sent. We are sent through the body of Christ ... and as the body of Christ, the church.

Through the church our ministries are organized and directed. Through the church, we financially support other community ministries, such as Crisis Assistance Ministry, Habitat for Humanity, Helping Empower Local People, McCreesh Place and others. Through the church we support our brothers and sisters in Christ in Guatemala. Through the church we seek to speak – with our words and our actions - with a particular voice in our city.

Here also we are fed to do these things. Through the church, worship is organized, the Word is preached and the sacraments received. Through the church we shape the lives of our children like no other institution in the world will. Through the church we enjoy each other's fellowship. Our financial resources enable all of this.

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Those of you who listen to public radio may have heard the local affiliate conducting its annual fund raising campaign last week. They work hard to explain the importance of the news and information they provide, how it relates to our lives and careers in concrete and valuable ways. Sometimes, they try to put a dollar value on it, as with a magazine or newspaper subscription. Those are all ways of thinking about the value of something in earthly ways.

That's not how we should think about our financial support for the church, for the church is *in* but not *of* this world. The church doesn't ask – as in that commercial – “What's in YOUR wallet?” It asks, “Where is your heart?”

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said his followers need to make a choice about what matters. Put your heart and treasure in earthly things and they will satisfy ... for a time. But then those satisfactions will disappear.

We give to the church for vastly different reasons, odd, even radical reasons that the world does not understand.

We should give because it is a spiritual discipline. Like prayer, reading scripture and worship, it defines how we orient our whole lives to God, holding nothing back.

And an important part of giving is pledging, making a promise to God that we will set aside God's portion every week and every month. The story goes about a man who gave to his church but didn't believe in pledging. Another member asked if he had a mortgage. “Yes,” the man said. Did he have a car payment? “Yes,” the man said. “Well,” his friend said, “why are you willing to make those pledges for your earthy things while withholding your pledge to God?”

We should give out of gratitude. Last week, a few of us gathered with some of our guests in the Salvation Army homeless shelter. As an ice breaker, I asked each person there to say his or her name and one word that described their day. The Caldwell folks described their days in a mix of thoughtful and reflective ways. But, to a one, the shelter guests expressed gratitude for their day. One had been able to catch all the buses she

needed that day. One had gotten a job, another a new opportunity near family in Georgia. One was just glad to be safe and warm and comfortable in the quiet of the shelter space.

Our gratitude to God, of course, goes much further, to the foot of the cross of the one who gave his life for our sins. But sometimes we need a wake-up call to appreciate what we have, including the excess we have to share.

Finally, we should give out of joy. The kind of joy that inspires giving – even sacrificial giving - is not happiness, for happiness fades with the hour. It is not optimism, because life brings inevitable challenges. It is not ecstasy or elation, for they are temporary. Joy in God remains, after the highest high and the lowest low.

Joy in God comes with knowing we belong to one who will never let us go, who sees beyond our failures and shortcomings and loves us still, one who greets us in the morning and whispers us to sleep at night.

Christ our Lord said, “I do not give as the world gives.”

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Amen