

The Desires of Your Heart
Sunday, Oct. 1, 2017
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
Rev. John Cleghorn
Text: Luke 12:32-34

Long ago, there was a man who seemed to have it all.

He had more than enough money and material things. He knew the love of a woman and other pleasures along with a few overindulgences. He studied philosophy. He gained power and influence yet still sought self-promotion and advancement. He knew God but only impersonally, philosophically.

None of it was enough, not nearly enough. The day finally came when he cried out to the universe for a response, something to give him the peace and satisfaction for which he so desperately yearned. The universe answered, in effect, "I am not God. Look elsewhere."

Reflecting on that day, the man wrote:

"I found myself weeping in the bitter sorrow of my heart. And suddenly I heard a voice from a nearby house, a child's voice, boy or girl I do not know: but it was sort of a sing song that repeated over and over again. 'Take and read, take and read.' Wiping away my tears I took this as a divine command and opened the scriptures and in silence read the passage on which my eyes first fell: 'Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in debauchery and impurity, not in contention and envy, but put on the Lord Jesus...'"

The man was St. Augustine, who after that day ultimately became a bishop of the church at the close the fourth century. He stands as one of the great church fathers and may be best known for the grateful prayer he offered about his conversion.

"You have made us for yourself," he prayed to the Lord, "and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee."

"You have made us for yourself," O Lord, "and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee."

It has been said that 1,600 years later, many in America suffer from what can be called "Restless Heart Syndrome." It has many symptoms. We may be constantly moving from one thing to the next, like Augustine, seeking happiness in whatever comes along. We may look around and be rightly anxious. Our black-hearted president matches his irresponsible military brinkmanship with North Korea with his utter disregard for anyone who isn't rich and powerful and, most important, like him.

Another symptom is anxiety, a very real medical diagnosis that affects almost one in five Americans. Yes, there are plenty of reasons why America suffers from restless heart syndrome.

As for God's heart, it breaks over our restlessness, our preoccupations, our false self-reliance, our near-maniac efforts to avoid simply being, simply being with God, simply dwelling at peace in God's profound presences and safe embrace.

For the last month, we have been thinking, talking and praying a lot about God's gift to us of who we are, God's creation of us as Her children, shaped and equipped with unique sets of spiritual gifts. These gifts are God's call to us to discover and embrace the ways God makes each of us for living with and pursuing God's purposes.

For all of the things in the world that we can't control, our spiritual gifts are things we can count on, we can rely on, by joyously living out of all of the ways God has shaped us.

Today, one more wordle appears on the cover of the bulletin, another word mosaic of the 19 gifts that are present in you, here at Caldwell. It brings us to one final gift to consider – the gift of generosity.

Yes, you heard that right, the gift of the opportunity to give, to be generous, joyful stewards of all that God gives us. In that gift from the Almighty lies a deep peace that can quiet so much that disquiets us, all that makes us so anxious, all that makes our hearts, like Augustine's, so often restless.

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Jesus knew that the hearts of his followers were just as restless. In the 12th chapter of the Gospel of Luke, scripture says "thousands" had gathered to hear him speak. Jesus used the chance to give the people a little perspective and reassurance of God's sovereign and intimate care.

He told them of how God counts the hairs on our heads. He pointed to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field as examples of how God's creation finds comfort in God's care and provision. He told the story of the rich fool who one year produced a great crop, so great his one barn was not big enough to store it. "I know what I will do," said the man in Jesus' story. "I'll just build another barn so I can keep it all for myself." That wasn't the answer Jesus was looking for.

In the verses we heard Felicia read earlier, Jesus spells out another way to go.

"Do not be afraid, little flock," he began, repeating those words, "do not be afraid," that appear more than any other in scripture, words that speak to our restless hearts. Jesus continued, "for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

Just as Augustine prayed in gratitude that God made us for Himself, Jesus says it gives God joy to give us the kingdom. Did you get that? It gives God joy and pleasure to give to us. Then Jesus said:

“Sell your possessions and give to the poor.”

That strikes our ears, so attuned to a culture of acquisition, and it seems unreasonably extreme. But we need to hear that as an echo of the story of the rich fool a few verses earlier. The rich fool failed to know that he had enough, that he had far more than enough. Yet he still hoarded more, all for himself. The same goes for each of us, whether we are rich or not. Christ calls us to ask, “Do we have enough?” If so, we are to give the excess to those who are in need.

Jesus continued, “Provide purses for yourself that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.”

With these words, Jesus speaks of a different kind of security than the world can ever offer. We can put our money in the bank, where it is FDIC ensured. We can buy insurance to protect our assets, such as our home or our car. But all of that is of this world, only of this world.

In speaking to the crowds, Jesus pointed to something no money can buy, no government can protect, no insurance can replace – the knowledge, the peace, the joy that comes when we receive life by measuring what is enough and giving out of our abundance. That, Christ says, can remove the restlessness of our hearts.

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” I like the New Living Translation even better.

“For where your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will be also.”

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Jesus' words make plain what the restlessness of our lives so often masks. Our treasure, our financial resources, our material possessions, and the desires of our hearts are inextricably linked.

We may tell ourselves that our hearts will be more at peace if we have more than we really need in the bank. We may tell ourselves that we need more stuff to be happy, when we may already have more than we can use. But sooner or later, the lie of “more, more, more” catches up with us. Our hearts will remain restless when we know that, for many of us at least, we have more than enough while others suffer and scrape by, if they get by at all.

How and where we seek the peace and the joy of giving, rather than hoarding, is up to each of us. The world is full of dire needs. Our city and our country offer many worthy responses to the world's hurting.

Among them is this church, the place where you practice your faith, the place you find rare community, the place where you are invited by our Lord to be yourself and to give to others beyond yourself, the place we are given to grow in relationship with others and with our Lord.

Today we begin the stewardship season that raises the budget for our ministries and missions in 2018. It's an exciting time for so many reasons. We will welcome a new associate pastor; for the first time a full-time associate who will bring rich experience and deep skills in ministry. With that addition, all of our ministries are expanded, as the overall strength and capacity of this church grows through the devotion of its lay leaders, members, friends, partnerships and staff.

My request to you today is simple: Begin praying. Begin considering what is enough and what you can do to give life to others, just as God came in Christ to give us life.

You will receive your pledge packets explaining our missions and budget next Sunday. For now, please prayerfully reflect on Christ's questions for today:

"What is enough?"

"What does your heart desire?"

"Where is your treasure?"

Amen.