

“Hidden in Plain Sight”**October 22, 2017****Caldwell Presbyterian Church****Rev. John Cleghorn****Texts: Isaiah 45:1-6, Matthew 6:16-21**

We begin this morning with an item from the “Truth is Stranger Than Fiction” file. Or, in this case, it might be called “Truth is Sadder Than Fiction.”

Last year, a family here in North Carolina lost a loved one to soon. On a recent morning, the mother went to visit grave, only to find the headstone missing. When the police looked into the matter, they found that the headstone had been stolen by a man who had handled the burial arrangements.

Except he didn’t call it a theft. He said he simply “repossessed” the headstone as leverage in an ongoing financial dispute with the family over his burial costs. As if this story isn’t sad enough, the man who “repossessed” the headstone has a second job in addition to running a cemetery monument company. He calls himself a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It makes you wonder, doesn’t it? Is anything safe? Is there a place on earth that is out of the reach of human depravity? Has human brokenness saturated the world that deeply?

Is there a place we can count on and trust in, at the end of the day? Is there a place where moths cannot reach and ruin, where rust cannot corrode or where thieves cannot enter in and steal?

We find that metaphorical language about moths and rust and thieves in the scripture we have been walking with this month during our stewardship season. We heard it a moment ago in Matthew and a similar verse appears in Luke.

It is part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, perhaps his most complete explanation of how his followers are to live out their faith in all aspects of their lives. You know parts of it by heart. He tells his followers they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. He preaches against adultery and revenge. He instructs his followers to care for the needy and even love our enemies.

Jesus uses this earthy language about moths and rust when he comes to the subject of money. You see, moths and rust ate at away at material things back then just as they do today. But Jesus is also talking about what eats at us spiritually. Jesus is asking, “What corrodes our souls and decays our spirits?”

Last week in my blog I asked if you might share some examples from your own lives. The first to respond was Sally Herlong in our church office. It is her job to make Caldwell's administrative and office functions run. Sally has one of those jobs where there are plenty of moths and rust, real and otherwise. And she was having one of *those* days, the kind we have all had.

What did she say were the moths of her spirit? She wrote in capital letters – "TECHNOLOGY."

We know how she feels, don't we? Who hasn't spent hours on the phone with some computer support person, maybe on the other side of the world, trying just to get the dad-gum computer to do what it's supposed to do.

Another of you wrote back a bit more seriously about the soul-eating pain he had experienced for years. He wrote:

"My spirit was robbed from me for 10-15 years because of all of the homophobia I encountered around me.... All you heard in the news or read in the papers were instances of damnation and it was the era of Jesse Helms. I never lost faith in God, but lost all faith in the church."

Blessedly, however, he has experienced this church and other places of acceptance. He has found their warm and unconditional embrace. He has put his faith and his trust in a place that is out of the reach of moths and rust that for years ate away at his spirit.

What are the depositories of our lives? Where do we place our trust, our hearts, our resources?

Jesus said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy 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."

The language of treasure echoes through scripture. The crowd knew then what Jesus was talking about. He was talking about money. Just a verse or two later, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made it even more plain.

"You cannot serve both God and money."

That's the thing about Jesus – he didn't dance around the subject of money. It was, in fact, one of his favorite topics. So we shouldn't dance around the subject of money, either. Our relationship with money is a big part of our relationship with God.

Most of you probably know the scriptural instructions as well as I do: That we are to give our first fruits back to God. That we are to keep our lives free from the love of money.

That we are to be content with having enough and not more, that others might have enough. That we are to be joyful givers.

And there is also no need to dance around the specifics. When it is specific about amounts, more often than not, scripture calls for a tithe, a tenth of our income, to be given away for others. It's true. That sounds like a lot, I understand. To some, it probably sounds impossible.

Rev. Dr. Peter Marshall, who for years was a pastor in Atlanta and then a chaplain of the U.S. Senate, tells the story of a man who came to him with a problem.

"I used to tithe regularly, some years ago," the man started out, "but now I am earning \$500,000 a year.

"Rev. Marshall," he confided, "There is just no way I can afford to tithe on \$500,000 a year. That's \$50,000."

The pastor thought for a moment and responded.

"I see your problem. Let's pray ... O Lord," he began, "I pray that you would reduce this man's salary back to the place that he can afford to tithe."

I don't know if any of you has that problem. Let me say, at least, that if you are not tithing, I hope you have a plan to move toward a tithe each year.

And, while we are not dancing around the issue, we should be plain about where we are in the life of this church. Two years ago, we made a decision together to do something we've never done before. Bring aboard a full-time associate pastor with benefits, as opposed to the two part-time, temporary pastors we have had before.

This is a big step for us as a church, a long-term commitment to expanded ministry. Our mission statement calls us to be active in our city as agents of change, as the hands and feet of Christ, as advocates and activists, as those who go to the margins to bear witness and share the good news of God's love and God's standard of justice.

But we cannot do any of that if we are not healthy, if we are not fed and cared for, individually and collectively, as a community of faith. Our associate pastor will deepen how we care for one another – while we care for others in our city.

At the same time, we hope to increase our missions and justice budget for the 11th consecutive year, continue to raise our children and youth in the word and produce creative and stirring worship that anchors us every week in remembering who and whose we are.

When we add all this and more up, we project a 15% increase in our budget for 2017, as you may have read in your stewardship materials. That's no small number. But it is what our personnel and other costs call for.

And we should be clear about something else. Many of you know a benefactor has indicated a willingness to make a gift to Caldwell. With profound depth, we thank God for that. But whatever that turns out to be, it does not replace our responsibility for the day to day operations and ministries of this church. Large gifts have ruined churches before. We must ensure that it won't happen here. Today, after worship in The Third Place, we will hold an informal town hall to talk more about all of this and answer your questions about any of that.

What it adds up to for each of us is a need to think long, carefully and prayerfully about our role and our pledge to expand what this church means to each of us and our city. Commitment Sunday, the day we bring and celebrate our pledge for 2018, is next week.

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All of that covers what you might call the "what" of this year's stewardship campaign. But the far more important question for us as people of faith is "why" – why we are to prioritize God and God's work through the church as first in our lives, in every way.

The answer to that question can be found in an act of worship we have already celebrated today. The answer is found at the baptismal font.

When we baptized Georgia Mae today, we used words that come from today's reading from the prophet Isaiah. Those words tell us all we need to know about the love and the knowledge our God has for each of us.

God said through the prophet, "I call you by name."

We repeat these words with every baptism to celebrate that God calls each child – or adult – who is baptized ... by name. That God knows each of us personally and intimately, our hopes and dreams, our fears and worries.

But ... those words were *not* first spoken to an infant like Georgia Mae. As we heard in the full reading of today's Isaiah passage, they were God's words through the prophet to Cyrus, Cyrus the Great, the king of what was then Persia between 559 and 530 B.C.

God chose Cyrus for something special. Cyrus would go on to conquer the powerful Babylonians. It was the Babylonians who had, years before, exiled God's people, the nation of Israel, from their cherished city, Jerusalem. God's people were scattered across the lands, but Cyrus welcomed them back to Jerusalem. God called and used

Cyrus to reestablish God's people in their home city, restoring their position among nations.

As God spoke to Cyrus, God made it clear what She would do to bring Her people back home. Three times in today's reading, we hear the promise, "I will"

"I will go before you and level the mountain.

"I will break down the gates of bronze and cut through the bars of iron."

These are the promises of our God of liberation, aren't they? The vows of a God who has freed people from whatever held them captive since time began. They are the pledge of a God who regathers and reconciles Her people.

In the third "I will" statement in today's reading, God adds this promise:

"I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places."

Here we are again. Talk of "treasures" and talk of "riches."

But just what is the prophet saying on God's behalf? Is God telling the returning nation of Israel that there is some hidden treasure somewhere – enough money to ease their return to Jerusalem, to make life comfortable again after all those hard years in exile?

Is God saying there is a stash somewhere for each of us, too – maybe a jackpot-winning lottery ticket with our name on it, to ease our pains and solve all of our problems?

Or is God talking about something else? Is God reminding us again of Her original promise, a promise the world can neither make nor fulfill – the promise of an intimate and loving relationship, a relationship in which our name is written in a book that is far out of reach of the world's brokenness, a book stashed away where moths cannot consume it, where rust cannot corrode it, where thieves cannot enter in and steal it?

When the prophet Isaiah speaks of "the treasures of darkness" and the "riches stored in secret places" are we to run out of here and go on a buried treasure hunt in hopes of finding material fortunes that might answer all of life's questions?

Or is the promise right here, right here, hidden in plain sight, the promise you extended today to Georgia Mae. It is the promise of God's gracious adoption, the promise of God's call to serve others, the promise you share with each other through life's ups and downs and through the ministries and outreach of this, your church, your faith community, in the name of Christ Jesus.

In this temporal world of such uncertainty, where moths and rust enter in, where thieves break in and steal, thanks be to God that we don't have to look very far for what matters, what really matters.

Amen