

November 12, 2017 Stewardship Series, #2 Patricia Weatherwax

“Faith and Treasure: When They’re Hard to Find”

Matthew 6:21 “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Hebrews 12:4-17 (The Voice)

Among you, in your striving against sin, none has resisted *the pressure* to the point of death, as He (Jesus) did.

Indeed, you seem to have forgotten the proverb directed to you as children:

My child, do not ignore the instruction that comes from the Lord,
or lose heart when He steps in to correct you;

For the Lord disciplines those He loves,
and He corrects each one He takes as His own.

Endure hardship as God’s discipline *and rejoice* that He is treating you as His children, for what child doesn’t experience discipline from a parent? But if you are not experiencing the correction that all true children receive, then it may be that you are not His children after all. Remember, when our human parents disciplined us, we respected them. *If that was true*, shouldn’t we respect and live under the correction of the Father of all spirits even more? Our parents corrected us for a time as seemed good to them, but God only corrects us to our good so that we may share in His holiness.

When punishment is happening, it never seems pleasant, only painful. Later, though, it yields the peaceful fruit called righteousness to everyone who has been trained by it. So lift up your hands that are dangling and brace your weakened knees. Make straight paths for your feet so that what is lame *in you* won’t be put out of joint, but will heal. Pursue peace with everyone, and holiness, since no one will see God without it. Watch carefully that no one falls short of God’s favor, that no well of bitterness springs up to trouble you and throw many others off the path. Watch that no one becomes wicked and vile like Esau, *the son of Isaac*, who for a single meal sold his invaluable birthright. You know *from the stories of the patriarchs* that later, when he wished to claim his blessing, he was turned away. He could not reverse his action even though he shed bitter tears over it. *Holy word, holy wisdom, Thanks be to God.*

Introduction

We are trying to get a bit of perspective on what we treasure, and on our faith, and how they come together. At First Presbyterian Church find unified treasure in our purpose, which is: ” to share God's love and grace with all people and celebrate the truth of Jesus Christ”.

Jesus taught: “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Jesus was the greatest rabbi (teacher) and the Bible is filled with wisdom for our daily lives, even though it’s from an extremely different cultural context.. God’s word is God-breathed, it’s

alive with God's spirit, and will say exactly what God needs us to hear in different ways on different days. I'm concluding my 2017 use of the sermon book called Hebrews today. Hebrews fits today because it's all about learning life lessons and applying faith to practical living. When I read Hebrews this is what I hear it address:

Faith and Treasure: When They're Hard to Find"

Because faith is hard to find, sometimes. The preacher to the Hebrews says it this way:

“do not ignore the instruction that comes from the Lord,
or lose heart when He steps in to correct you;
For the Lord disciplines those He loves,
and He corrects each one He takes as His own.”

And when we aren't connecting with God it seems like we've somehow fallen out of God's favor.

It's an old line, but it seems to stay true.

When God seems far away- it wasn't God who moved.

Sometimes it feels like God is so far away. Faith, our connection to God sometimes is miniscule not mighty. Let me remind you what Jesus taught the original disciples about faith. You don't need a boat load. In Matthew 17: 20 we read that Jesus says: “truly I tell you, if you have faith, even as small as a mustard seed, you can move mountains; nothing will be impossible for you.”

Mustard seeds are very tiny. (a picture of mustard seeds compared to the tip a ballpoint ink pen).

I doubt I can move a mountain, so I doubt I have even that much faith some days. But here is what I can preach to you: Faith is hard to find sometimes. But God is always with you. Earlier in Hebrews (11:1) we hear that “faith is the assurance of what we hope for and the conviction of what we do not see”. Thanks be to God-by the grace of God- that's why we believe in grace. It's not how much faith we have, it's how much grace God, through Jesus Christ has poured out onto us!

What else about faith and those little mustard seeds? In Mark's gospel (4:32) it speaks about that little seed growing into a big plant for the birds to rest in. I don't have the ink pen there to show just how amazingly a mustard seed grows- here's one I planted in a dixie cup, just two weeks ago. (the picture is of a single sprout, 3" tall)

What did you expect in two weeks?? Do you expect your faith to grow by leaps and bounds? There's an envelope of mustard seeds in my office, left over from a VBS project a couple years back. They're sitting on a shelf. They aren't being fed. They aren't growing because they need something more than the nothing they have.

When faith seems hard to find, when our faith a boost, what do we do? We

- Don't stop believing God is there. (Hebrews 13:5)
- Don't stop praying. (Even just “I believe, help my unbelief”)

- Talk to somebody. (I have a spiritual director, who guides me, see souldig.org). You all have a pastor or two, and friends here.
- Listen to what you hear, from God and others. Wait.

This past summer my spiritual director suggested a reflection by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), a French theologian and scientist, because I wanted to know the future, apparently before God was ready to reveal it. (Ever done that?)

Every day, until my impatience passed, I read this:

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
 We are quite naturally impatient in everything
 to reach the end without delay.
 We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
 We are impatient of being on the way to something
 unknown, something new.
 And yet it is the law of all progress
 that it is made by passing through
 some stages of instability—
 and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you;
 your ideas mature gradually—let them grow,
 let them shape themselves, without undue haste.
 Don't try to force them on,
 as though you could be today what time
 (that is to say, grace and circumstances
 acting on your own good will)
 will make of you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit
 gradually forming within you will be.
 Give Our Lord the benefit of believing
 that his hand is leading you,
 and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself
 in suspense and incomplete.

Faith can be hard to find.. When you are in doubt, wait it out. Give the mustard seed time to grow. Wait. (pause)

Treasure is hard to find, sometimes, too.

“do not ignore the instruction that comes from the Lord,
 or lose heart when He steps in to correct you;

For the Lord disciplines those He loves,
and He corrects each one He takes as His own.”

Some of us got a chuckle last Sunday listening to Dr. Carlson talk about hunting for buried treasure as a boy. It was rather a treasure to hear a story like that, a glimpse into his private past. Lots of things like that are to be treasured. A fond memory of our own, or even someone else's. Success at a difficult task is treasured. The achievements of our younger members and friends, especially the things our own children and grandchildren do are treasured. The amazing things God has done, does, and is doing in our lives, all treasure. Soon again we will hear it again as part of the advent story: “Mary treasured these things in her heart” (Luke 2:19) It's nothing new. Treasures often are intangibles, life's simple pleasures, things that make us smile.

I was especially struck by something else Jeff said:

Want to find your treasure? It is quite simple, really. Just look where you spend your money, time and energy. That is your treasure, whether you like it or not. Do you feel your heart divided? Want to change how you feel? Then change how you spend your time, money and energy” (JSC 11052017)

Stay with me, here, as I descend a bit. Besides being stewardship month, which implies having enough to share, November is also always about being thankful and grateful. And we know December is about having it all, if you believe the commercials. For those of us who deal with depression, these longer, colder, darker days may leave us wondering where our treasures are buried. Sometimes we falsely believe that everyone else has treasure while we have rocks. Or maybe just dry lifeless mustard seeds? (picture of mustard seeds)

What does it mean if you are having a hard time finding the treasures in your life? What if you're like Mary, pondering things in your heart, but the pondering is dark and does not lead to smiles and gratitude? It may be a problem that needs a solution or it maybe depression.

When treasure seems hard to find, when treasures, tangible and intangible, seem hard to find, when we need 'more', what do we do? It's the same list as renewing our faith:

- Don't stop believing God is there.
- Don't stop praying.
- Talk to somebody. (I've had an amazing mental health counselor in the past when I needed special emotional support. Or if you need help managing your budget or career advice, find somebody to talk to. Call 211 or your health insurance o. or primary care provider.)
- Listen to what you hear, from God and others. Wait.

Jesus advised this when faith and treasures are hard to find, when stressed:

“Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness”. (Matt 6:33)
And even when it doesn't seem like you have much, see what you do have.

Your time and talent are treasures, too.

Maybe you have more time and talent than you do financial resources. Yes, we want your pledge, but we especially want you. Without you there isn't us. We need your *commitment* to be part of the **us** that is First Presbyterian Church, Battle Creek. Time and Talent, or maybe you have an idea. Or maybe? It is a bit amusing what the preacher says in the sermon we call Hebrews:

So lift up your hands that are dangling and brace your weakened knees.
Make straight paths for your feet (Hebrews 12:12-13)

It sounds like a pep talk for action! Dangling hands, weak knees, crooked paths, not the lingo we use, but they're all the opposite of useful, that's for sure!

What else? Yes! It's time for the annual time and talent survey. Yes. Time flies. Yes. we have done this every year. *Annual survey* means that. Why? Circumstances change- abilities develop, interests wain. I'd bet someone here at one time was very good at making macrame hanging plant holders, but we have new needs and new goals. There are now new connections to our website, and now your name can be directly submitted to someone who is looking for someone with your talents.

And, you can check options out, there on the website, and email people directly. With refreshed surveys new opportunities can develop.

Here's another idea about these surveys. You can volunteer rather than be asked! And pay attention to the communications the church puts out. I am all about grace and very little about what a Christ follower *ought* to do, but we are in this together. We do have a purpose, which is: "to share God's love and grace with all people and celebrate the truth of Jesus Christ".

One of our core values is "spirit empowered prayer" and prayer partners needed for our students. I admit I'm discouraged because it's been in the bulletin and Carillon and announced on Sundays and there are still students without anyone committed to praying for them. "Lift your dangling hands!"

Do you have an idea? Ask Emilee Janz how that works! She liked our art VBS a couple summers ago, and had the idea for a multigenerational party with crafts. You've heard about it: our Anticipating Christmas: chili, crafts and carols advent party on Dec 3. We got a team together to help Emilee make it happen. And it's going to be something you can invite friends and neighbors to. The local neighbors are being invited.

With our time and our talents, when there is work to do, the same list still applies! Maybe that list applies to everything:

- Don't stop believing God is here.
- Don't stop praying.

- Talk to somebody. (Check out the website for contact people, read Jan Emery's Volunteer Vibe in the Newsletter, email Lisa Brown from the Connection Team)
- Listen to what you hear, from others and from God. The answers you need will come.

As the preacher of what we call the book of Hebrews said: "Lift those dangling hands!"

Conclusion

A few hundred year later, Basil the Great (300 AD) prayed this way:

Teach us to ask aright for the right blessings. Guide the vessel of our life towards yourself, the tranquil haven of all storms-tossed souls. Show us the course we should take. ... guide and enable us to what is our true good, to rejoice in your glorious and gladdening presence. Amen and amen.