

NOTHING GOLD CAN STAY

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Psalm 112; Luke 14:1-14

***“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet,
do not sit down at the place of honor....
But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place...”***
Luke 14:8a, 10a

It's one of the hardest places in the world to get into: a massive, squat building of concrete, granite and steel, surrounded by a high fence. The roof was constructed to be bomb-proof. Its main door weighs 20 tons and is 21 inches thick.

The door has got a combination lock, but no one person has the whole combination. It was built to resist torches, drills and explosives.

Not that any of that matters, of course. Because your first challenge, in trying to get through that door, would be to get up to it. That's no easy matter: because this super-secure building has its own dedicated police force that guards it 24 hours a day.

Not only that, but the whole thing is located in the middle of an active U.S. Army base of 109,000 acres. The building is literally surrounded by thousands of guns and even tanks, along with soldiers who know how to use them.

You've probably guessed by now that the building I'm talking about is the United States Bullion Depository at Fort Knox, Kentucky. It's the place where

over half the U.S. gold reserve is stored.

Just how much gold is in there? Literally, tons of the stuff. Most of it is in 27-pound gold bars, although there's also a substantial number of gold coins retired from circulation.

How much is it worth? I looked it up, and found that the official estimate is just over 6 billion dollars: but that's a so-called "book value" set in 1973. Based on the current selling price of gold, the horde squirreled away at Fort Knox is estimated to be worth something in the neighborhood of 190 billion dollars.

The Bullion Depository was established to store the gold that once backed our nation's currency: but the United States went off the gold standard in 1971. In light of that decision, someone once asked then-Federal Reserve Chair Alan Greenspan why the government should hang onto all that gold? "In case we ever need it," was the reply.

So, on that basis, there it stays: 190 billion dollars' worth of gold that virtually no one ever sees, preserved intact under the most secure of conditions. That gold's going to stay right where it is.

Now, keep that in mind as you look at the poem printed on the cover of today's bulletin. Its title seems to be the antithesis of the Bullion Reserve at Fort

Knox: “Nothing Gold Can Stay.”

The late Robert Frost is the poet: a farmer and man of letters who became New England’s favorite son.

The poem is not about the sort of gold that sits there in the great vault at Fort Knox. It’s about tree buds in springtime that sprout a golden flower ever so briefly, before they become green leaves. Listen, as I read it for you:

**Nature’s first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf’s a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.**

It’s the simplest of poems — even for Robert Frost, who’s known for plain speaking and simple language. There’s not a word in that poem that’s more than two syllables long: most are just one. The rhymes are simple, the meter almost sing-song. A young child could get the gist of it.

Yet this poem is more than merely a celebration of nature. Those simple words display a profound message that most of us spend a lifetime living into. “Nothing gold can stay”: not on the springtime buds that soon mature into leaves; and not on those same leaves, either, as autumn succeeds summer and they turn

gold once again. Today's the first of September: it won't be long at all before those leaves will fall from their branches and become a part of the rich humus on the forest floor.

The writer of Psalm 90 has it right: as, in a philosophical moment, he addresses God the Creator, saying,

**You turn us back to dust,
and say, "Turn back, you mortals."
For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.
You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning;
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers. [vv. 3-6]**

"So teach us to count our days," the Psalmist continues a few verses later, **"that we may gain a wise heart."** [v. 12]

Robert Frost wrote this little poem at mid-life, after experiencing some terrible losses. Two of his children had died: and he'd also, by then, lost both his parents and a close friend as well. Some of the things Frost had come to value in his youth, he had now come to realize were but golden illusions. "Nothing gold can stay."

Yet how tenaciously you and I cling to some of those golden illusions! Will it really matter, in the end, how many diplomas once hung on our wall, how much

applause we garnered, or what (in terms of dollars) was the high-water mark of our net worth? These things — psalmists and poets know — are all illusions.

Today's Gospel lesson tells of something Jesus himself once tagged as a golden illusion: not in so many words, but in the way he taught his disciples how to handle it.

That thing is prestige: the social position people like you and me cultivate in life. For some of us, the race to climb the social ladder is the noblest of sports. It's a task we inherited from our parents and grandparents before us. It's often said we Americans are "a nation of immigrants." What that means is that those of our ancestors who first came to these shores started out in much humbler circumstances. They worked their way up: and we aspire to continue that tradition.

Which is why Jesus' words in Luke, chapter 14 may come as a terrible shock.

Luke tells us Jesus is "going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath" [14:1]. Two words in that sentence — "Pharisees" and "meal" — tell us this is going to be an occasion where the relative status of one person compared with another is going to be on everyone's mind.

First of all, a Pharisee is the host: and you know the Pharisees, in the New

Testament, are jealous guardians of social position. They, of all people, know how to keep score. They live for that sort of thing.

Second — and probably more important — the occasion for this gathering is a meal. In the Greco-Roman world (of which Israel was then a part), meals were about far more than merely eating. A meal was an occasion for people to come together, according to certain carefully-prescribed rules. You didn't just belly up to the buffet line and fill your plate. Your host invited you to recline on a couch in a particular place: and the distance between you and the seat of honor at the host's right hand had everything to do with who you were, and how your relative importance measured up against everyone else there.

Right in the middle of the festivities, a man comes in. He wants to see Jesus, and he's evidently very sick. His condition Luke calls "dropsy" — today, we'd call it edema, the swelling of the arms and legs as they retain fluid. Edema can signify a life-threatening condition, such as congestive heart failure.

Luke mentions that the Pharisees "are watching him closely." Some Bible scholars think some of them may even have sent the sick man in, as a sort of test. Jesus is renowned as a healer, and he's also well-known for playing fast and loose with the sabbath laws. Some of his opponents among the Pharisees just may have engineered this little ethical dilemma to see what Jesus would do — or, it may be

coincidence.

However the sick man got into the room, Jesus intentionally takes the bait. He heals the man: but before doing so, he lets the Pharisees know that *he* knows what they're thinking. In good rabbinical fashion, Jesus poses a question: "Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?" Then he proceeds to answer his own question by healing the man. Jesus even backs up his action with a legal footnote: he cites the argument of the great rabbis (based on the scriptures) that, yes, indeed it *is* lawful to pull a child or an animal out of a well on the sabbath: for the preservation of life is a higher principle than ritual purity.

The Pharisees know this perfectly well. It's an old, familiar argument, and Jesus has passed their exam. He's given a correct answer, so now the meal ought to continue in peace.

But then, Jesus goes on the offensive. He quits preachin', as they say, and goes to meddlin'. He begins to criticize his host's seating chart.

To get an idea what a big deal this is in that culture, just listen to something the Roman historian, Pliny, has to say. Commenting on a dinner party at which he was the guest of honor, Pliny reports how his host served different grades of food to the different guests. Up at the head table — or the head couches, to be more accurate — they were dining sumptuously on gourmet fare. Further out in the

room — and further down the pecking-order — the grub wasn't nearly so good. As for the wine, Pliny's host had carefully prepared three small flagons (or pitchers) to serve the stuff. "One," Pliny points out, "was for himself and me; the next for his friends of lower order (for you must know that he measures out his friendship according to the degrees of quality); and the third for his own freed-men and mine." It was pretty stingy and mean-spirited: but it did fulfill the letter of the law in that society.

Jesus looks around the room he's in. He sees all the guests milling around, anxiously looking for their place-cards. He gives them all a bit of ethical advice.

"Lose the seating chart!" he tells them. If someone invites you to a dinner party, don't do what everyone expects. If your place card reads, "Head Table," go sit instead at that table off behind the pillar: the one with the wobbly leg, where the clattering of pans from the kitchen makes it hard to carry on a conversation. "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled," says he, "and those who humble themselves will be exalted." [v. 11]

It's a hard teaching: hard, because it runs counter to just about every message you and I get from the larger culture. But there's a powerful truth in it: a truth I've seen, time and again, in the line of work I'm in.

Numerous times, in the course of my ministry, I've been called to sit at the bedside of someone who's dying. I read a few psalms, say a few prayers. I try to comfort the family — who, in the best of circumstances — are gathered round, to draw strength from one another and from God. I've done it in hospital rooms and in long-term care facilities. I've done it in elegant mansions and in humble apartments. As different as those settings may be, there's something very similar about the scene.

At the end of the day that is our lives, all that accumulation of gold — meaning not only money, but those achievements we spend our lives chasing and jealously guarding — is of very little importance. It no longer matters. That's because the poet's right: nothing gold can stay.

The one thing that does stay — and, I firmly believe, goes with us into the life to come — is the simple golden currency of love. That love is poured out upon this universe in abundance by its Creator. We all receive it, as long as we accept the invitation to do so.

You and I can't bank that love. We can't save it for a rainy day. We can't hide it behind Fort Knox walls. We can only spend it — wildly, freely and frivolously — because it never runs out. Quite the contrary: the more of God's love we give away, the more we find we have.

In a little while, we'll come to the Table of the Lord: which is a sort of dress rehearsal for the greater feast in the heavenly places. There's no preferred seating at this table, no favored place. We all come to it equally hungry. By the grace of God, we'll all leave it equally satisfied.

Let us pray:

**Lord of the broken loaves,
Lord of the spoken words:
by your body broken for us,
by your wine of life outpoured,
Jesus, feed again your people.
Be our Host, our Life, our Lord.**

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