

Whose Gold Is It, and What do we do?
 A sermon by David Roquemore
 First Presbyterian Church, Newton
 November 6, 2022

Haggai 1: 15b - 2:9

So, where else in the Bible do we hear God claim that the gold is his and the silver is his?

This is a long way from the senior pastor who came to me one day and asked me to rewrite the prayers because, as he put it, “people will say ‘I worked for that and it belongs to me’”. We might treat it as though it is ours, as though we earned it, and it is ours, to use, but in fact, it belongs to God. Everything belongs to God!

Of course, if we take that literally, we’d be demanding that God bring the church more money! But in fact, God acts through each of us, and of course, that means that though we acknowledge that the gold and silver belong to him, we have to make the determination as to how we will use that gold and silver, entrusted to us. We are God’s trustees; we are the ones God assumes, — hopes — will use what is entrusted to us in ways that reflect our commitment to Christ Jesus. “The latter splendor of this house will be greater than the former.”

I will tell you a story. I was here for my 2nd interview, and was looking around the sanctuary with a few committee members. I saw that everything in it is pretty clean, and I began to fear that this congregation was like others, that do not use their buildings at all! So I asked how it is kept up so well. Gary MacDougal said, “well, we believe in using the building, and if it gets worn or dirty, we just repair it and clean it up, and keep using it.” That was refreshing to hear!

I know, though. We are, we seem to be, in decline. Numbers are falling and we are all getting older. We have to replace ourselves with younger people! We have to find people who can match our level of giving! This is hard work. What can we do?

First thing is, don’t panic. People often have the idea that things are so urgent, that we need an immediate solution. Let’s fire the pastor! That will change everything. Ummm, I don’t think that is the solution. Let’s hire a better youth director! Again, changing the staff doesn’t mean things will change in the community. That said, I see that churches often staff for the past instead of the future. So we must continually evaluate our staffing and where we go forward. You know, when congregations lose a staff member, there is always some panic. I know of a congregation where the very long-term senior pastor retired. There was a movement to get the associate pastor to take the job, but the presbytery (and good wise counsel) said, “don’t do that.” Once they got over the panic, they hired a very good senior pastor who stayed for years. So don’t panic and start looking for solutions; sometimes the answer is a change of personnel, but not in the sense of going back to former employees and former greatness.

Second, we live in a conservative town. Yes, and we are one of the few liberal-facing congregations in that town. And yes, that means we are one of the few places that welcome people who don't fit in at other places. So I think we should play that up, and let people know we will accept you if other churches don't. Each congregation must carve out its niche; ours could be the "we'll take you if no one else will" niche. That's not a bad one, by the way. It might even be the one Jesus would recommend.

Third, we have to trust God. God will bring us the people he wants here, and God will bring us the ones who will challenge us, as well as those who find here a succor and a respite from constantly having to fight to be accepted or noticed. And that is what Jesus was about, wasn't he? So we trust God to do with us what he wants, and I don't think God is ready to abandon us after all these years - what are we, at 164 or something? We have been here a long time and we have a bright future. We just need to define it and embrace it.

I served on the Committee on Ministry in one presbytery. I sent letters to several little congregations near our town, asking them to report. One said, "we have decided to close." The executive presbyter and I hurried over to have a meeting with them. It turned out they had about 20 on the rolls, but only 5 people who ever came to worship. Everyone else lived away. So we had a long conversation with that Session. They agreed that the life of their congregation was over, that it had served its purpose and God wisely and well during its heyday, but now it was time to stop.

Well, that isn't us! That is not our future! That is not who we are. We have a bright future here, but we have to determine how to make it happen.

Some ideas:

We have a shower ministry. A few people come by each week; several come each week. The homeless have nowhere to go; no place. Could we open some sort of place somewhere in town for them to hang out, to get out of the weather? To feed them? There are a lot of ideas that swirl around this. We may not be able to do this alone, ourselves, but we can get it done. One gift we have is leadership and administrative ability. I told you about my friend who'd forgotten to fill out the paperwork for a government grant, who came to us asking if we knew anyone. The next morning he got a call; the money was waiting for him. He called me up screaming! The gold is mine and the silver is mine, says the Lord.

We have talked a lot in committee about some sort of after-school program for children. We once had one and I suspect that's part of the problem; we can't get our minds out of that groove (or rut?) and explore something new and different. I can see it starting off as once a week, but growing to every day. A place for kids to come, be safe, be given a snack, a place to play or do their homework, and learn that God's people care for them! In a world where few people are willing to care, that could make a big difference.

Same thing goes for older people, and we already host the Senior Morning Out program in connection with the county. That program has some rules, but really, we could get

involved with it and see it grow. It's easy for people to be angry at outside groups. I don't know why it is, but an outside group is frequently seen as "them", as outsiders. And so rather than get involved, we set our alarms and watch them closely. I see this as an opportunity. We should explore it. I checked the rules: you have to be over 60 - that includes most of us — and there is no income ceiling. We could all go, though they would probably appreciate knowing if 96 of us were coming.

It is possible that we measure our success by the wrong metrics. We look at what we used to have and lament what has been lost. Well, look, the economy crashed and industry left town. That was a few years after we built a large building, which now is mostly empty most of the time. We used to be bigger, we used to have a lot of children, we used to have lots of staff and pastors. Why can't we do that again? Do something, pastor!

What if we are not thinking the way God thinks? What if God has a different (and better) idea for our future than we do? Yes, we once had a lot of people and a lot of children — so? What we once had is not necessarily our future!

The gold is mine and the silver is mine says the Lord God.

The resources are here. We have the money, we have the people, we have the time. We need to decide what to do, and start moving. Less hand-wringing, more hands on deck! God is with us, and whichever particular thing we choose, God will be with us, to see that we do our best and that he is glorified. May God bless us all, for he has the gold and silver — and what he needs are willing hands! If not ours, then whose?

Thanks be to God! Amen.