

“Tethered to God”
 Anna Pinckney Straight
 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
 October 7, 2018

Matthew 6: 21

21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

One of the blogs I subscribe to is written by Sean Deitrich. Maybe some of you read him, too. Sean of the South is his stage name. He writes about life and people, and the beauty in both.

A couple of days ago this was his post:¹

He sits on the steps of the Shell Station. A backpack beside him. His skin is rawhide. His beard is white. His name is Buck. He’s from North Carolina. He fought in Korea, and completed two tours in Vietnam. He’s not here begging, he’s resting his feet. “My old feet hurt more’n they used to,” says Buck. “It’s hard getting old, buddy.”

There is a half-smoked cigar next to him. He dug it from an ashtray. It still has life in it, he says. He’s sipping coffee.

“First cup’a Joe I had in a week,” he tells me. “Fella gave me a quarter, few minutes ago. Piled my coins together to buy me a cup.”

When Buck went inside to buy it, there were only cold dregs left. He asked the cashier if it were possible to brew a fresh pot. She told him to get lost. So, he’s drinking dregs—for which he is grateful.

There are holes in his shoes. He found these sneakers in a sporting-good-store dumpster. Buck estimates he’s put nearly eight hundred miles on them. His bloody toes poke through the fronts. His middle toenail is missing.

Buck explains, “God says, ‘Don’t worry what you’ll eat drink or wear.’ That’s hard sometimes. Specially when you ain’t eaten.”

I walk inside the gas station on a mission. I ask the aforementioned cashier to brew a fresh pot of coffee—for me. I am very nice about it. She smiles and says, “Sure, sweetie.” I buy a hot cup, an armful of snacks, and a pack of Swisher Unsweetened Mini-Cigars. I give them to Buck, and I tuck all the cash I have in my wallet, about \$80, into his hand. I wish I had more, but I don’t.²

Buck starts crying. And the truth is [Deitrich writes], I’m embarrassed to even be telling you this. Because this story isn’t about me—it’s about Buck.

“Did you know that I see God in you?” Buck tells me through glazed eyes. And now I’m the one who’s crying. I stumble over my own words. All I can get out is, “Thank you for your service.”

He gets up to walk away. His big backpack must weigh a hundred pounds. “Going to Walmart,” he says. “Gon’ buy new shoes. Gon’ get me a hot pizza, man. Yessir, I just saw God on the street corner.”

And he’s gone. [Deitrich concludes] I just met someone. An invisible someone. A man who—despite whatever his problems may be—isn’t lost. A man who knows things.

¹ <http://seandietrich.com/soldier/>

I have made a couple of small adaptations for the sermon as well as shortened the text- I hope you’ll go and read the original.

² This originally read: “I give them to Buck, and I tuck a bill into his hand. I wish I had something bigger, but I don’t.”

Who smokes used cigars. [And Mr. Buck, I wish I could tell you] You're wrong, sir. You didn't see God on a street corner today. I did.

I imagine if we were able to talk with Sean Deitrich, he would say that clearing out his wallet to give money to Mr. Buck was the easiest thing he'd ever done. Now, could Sean have used that \$80 he gave to Mr. Buck? Of course. That might have been an oil change for his car. A night in a hotel while he travels and writes. A date night with his wife. But making the choice to forgo or postpone those things in favor of Mr. Buck wasn't just right, it was easy. It was good. Deitrich could give it. And he did.

And even thought I've only been here two years, I believe, you would have done the same.

"The Lord loves a cheerful giver." [2 Corinthians 6:7] Paul writes to the church in Corinth. So many times, it's easy and fun to give.

But what about when it isn't so easy? When God isn't so clear. Or you might not agree with everything going on at church? Or there's something else you want? Or you're worried about the future? What about then?

That's when we need to be, as author Tom Berlin³ describes it, "tethered to God."

In his sermon on the verse of scripture we heard this morning, my colleague in Chapel Hill, Bob Dunham, wrote:⁴

[Matthew is clear about this] if you are going to follow Jesus, you will have to make a decision about your money. Now, I know, that's not very comfortable talk. And over the years in the church we have had a great reticence about discussing such matters openly. But Jesus had no such qualms, and neither does the Bible. Jesus spoke quite clearly and quite often of wealth and material possessions. He said our hearts follow our checkbooks, not the other way around - well, not exactly that; what he said was: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." But our checkbooks and our investment statements reveal so well where our treasure lies today, and how willing we are to share it. Knowing the human heart, Jesus said our hearts follow our treasure, not the other way around....he spoke of sharing and stewardship and generosity, not so much as matters of obligation for his followers, but as matters of fact. One who lives under the grace and goodness of God, he said, will simply want to share generously of the abundance God has given.

Of course, he's right. But on those days when we find ourselves a bit short of gratitude, [when the politics of the week have broken our hearts or threatened to break our spirits] or forget that we are stewards, [Jesus] reminds us that stewardship is sometimes prompted only by reminders of our discipleship, of our fidelity to Christ. Sometimes, you know, when joy and gratitude fail to prompt us to faithfulness, we may need to be stirred by the call to duty and responsibility.⁵

That is why I often suggest that we never let the offering plate pass us by without putting something in it... [No matter how you pay your pledge].. even if we only put in a

³ Berlin, Tom. *Defying Gravity: Break Free from the Culture of More*. Abingdon Press, 2016

⁴ "People of the Gift" A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham, University Presbyterian Church, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, May 25, 2014. His sermon was actually on the Luke version of this text.

⁵ Bob Dunham's footnote: The late William Sloane Coffin, Jr. used to make such a case often in his sermons.

dollar or pocket change... the discipline of putting something in the plate is a subtle, but clear way of reminding us to lead with our treasure, so that our hearts will follow.



In 1999, the United States' women's soccer team won the World Cup. The win was sealed by Brandi Chastain landing a penalty kick. Chastain, fully present in the moment, tore off her shirt and knelt on the ground, fists in the air, in pure celebration. The photograph of that moment has been voted one of the most iconic photos in all of sports history.⁶

But the part of that story I didn't know until recently is that Chastain made that goal by kicking with her left foot. Chastain is right-handed, right-footed. She had never before kicked with her left foot in a game- in her entire history of playing soccer. Never. How did it come to be? Her coach was watching, he'd studied the tapes and studied the game. And he knew that the opposing team, China, generally, and specifically, their goalie, was used to Brandi's kicks with her right foot. And so just before she went in, he told her, "you have to take it with your left foot," he said.

And she did. But I can imagine, in our independent world, that she might have been tempted not to. She hadn't done it before, ever. And EVERYTHING was riding on this kick. She might have thought she knew better. But she trusted her coach. And they won.

That's the kind of thing it takes to be tethered to God. To listen to the one who knows us better than we know ourselves. Who not only knows the world and the way it works, but the One who created it. And God has said that we need to give. So our treasure isn't our stuff, it's our relationships. It's our faith. It's caring and giving. That's where we'll find joy. Contentment. Justice. Peace.

Tom Berlin, in the chapter of the book Defying Gravity that is the basis for this week's sermon provides good, practical steps for doing this in our lives. Make a budget. Live simply. Set a generosity goal. There's good stuff in there, I hope you'll read it.

What I've been struck by this week is how the same principle follows for so many places in our lives. Forgiveness. Loving our enemies. Seeking justice. Loving mercy. Walking humbly with God. It's easy when those things are easy, and what we want. But what about when they are hard, or maybe we don't want to?

That's when being tethered to God, trusting what God tells us to do, like a coach telling his star player to kick with her left foot, seeing God in a cigar smoking veteran, can make all of the difference.

Thanks be to God, for a people who seek to be tethered to God. Amen.

⁶ <https://deadspin.com/how-the-most-iconic-photo-in-womens-soccer-was-almost-n-1708269396>

I was directed to this article by my colleague the Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana on her blog: <https://www.maryannmckibbendana.net/mamdblog/2018/7/18/kick-with-your-left-foot>