

Nothing Gold Can Stay

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Daniel 3:13-18; Matthew 16:24-26

A long time ago I was given a book to read called *The Outsiders* – written actually by a teenager, Susan Hinton, S.E. Hinton – about two groups of high school kids in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It was made into a movie in the 1980's by Francis Ford Coppola and launched the acting careers of none other than – Tom Cruise, Rob Lowe, Emilio Estevez, Diane Lane, Patrick Swayze, Ralph Macchio and Matt Dillon. Pretty amazing cast. It's all about the struggle for teenage identity and community. It has a tragic end that thrusts most of the characters out of youth and childhood into the oft-felt peril of adulthood. Two of the boys share a poem with each other by Robert Frost called, *Nothing Gold Can Stay*. The poem goes like this:

*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 a poem that speaks to the impermanence of life and how the beauty of our beginnings quickly changes into something else. Childhood becomes youth, youth becomes adulthood, adulthood becomes aging, and aging becomes death. Nothing gold can stay.

It doesn't mean that we don't want it to. There's so much in this life that we don't want to change. And maybe that's one of the reasons we are so attracted to gold itself. Gold the metal. The permanence, seemingly, of gold. We are drawn to gold. It has

been that way since the beginning of time. Human beings love gold. Somewhere in your house or on your person there is gold. I have gold on my finger. We love gold. It is a precious and indestructible metal. It shines, it does not go away. It increases our net value along with a lot of other things we collect. Houses, cars, toys. They feel real, they feel permanent. And we want to think that maybe, just maybe gold can stay?

And we don't want to think that gold can change us. Yet gold does change things, doesn't it? It changes us. We don't like to think that's the case – but it is. The more gold you have ... the more change occurs to you and in you. Lottery winners tell you that they are going to stay the same person – but we know that's not true. The truth is ... this non-living “permanent” thing – acts upon you whether you want to believe it or not.

The Romans told to each other the myth of Midas – who loved his gold. When the god Dionysus came to him and promised to grant him one wish – Midas wished that whatever he touched would turn to gold. So he got what he wished for. And what a great thing it was ... everything he touched turned to gold – including even his beautiful roses. But then things changed when he realized that he could no longer eat or drink – because his food and drink turned to gold when he touched it. And it's when he touched his daughter and she turned to gold that he realized that the gift he asked for was not the gift he wanted.

Gold changes you.

And the degree to which you believe you are unsusceptible is the degree to which you likely are susceptible.

So Nebuchadnezzar in our story this morning decides to create for himself and for his empire a golden statue. Sixty cubits high. Ninety feet high. Ninety feet of gold. And it becomes as a god to him. And he orders the empire to bow down to his new god ... his new idol ... his ninety feet of gold. Now

this is not just a suggestion of Nebuchadnezzar ... this is the law. This is the thing you do if you don't want to be thrown into the fiery furnace. And the empire bows down. “ ... all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshipped the golden statue ...” scripture says. Not a hard thing to bow down to. Gold is never a hard thing to bow down to. There feels like there is little cost in bowing down to gold.

Remember when your boss came in and told you that he really liked what you were doing and that he was putting in for a substantial raise for you ... some more gold for you. And a new title ... a new golden title for you. And, oh by the way, there are a few more things I'd like for you to do for me. I need for you to bow down to this gold I'm giving you. You know how it goes. Gold is never a hard thing to bow down to.

But there are these three faithful Jewish boys – Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – who hear the king's orders to bow down to the gold. Again, what's the harm? Especially if it means staying out of the fiery furnace. What's the big deal? The whole empire is doing it.

But Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refuse to bow down. Scripture doesn't tell us why they do not

bow down. There are no words from these three. Lots of words from Nebuchadnezzar ... but only one simple statement from Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego – and it is simply to say that they will not bow down. So we are left to imagine that in the mind of these three Jewish men is this thought ... that to lay hold of the golden one – is to risk the golden one laying hold of them. To touch the golden one ... was to let the golden one touch them. To turn their flesh into gold ... and to render them as dead as the metal itself.

You see Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego understand that the truth of it all is – that nothing gold can stay. Nothing gold can live. Nothing gold can do anything but change you into something you don't want to be.

And what they wanted to be was sons of God. What they wanted to be was followers of God. What they wanted to be was faithful friends of God. That's all they wanted. And that's all they were going to be. And if it meant getting thrown into the fiery furnace ... then it meant getting thrown into the fiery furnace. But at least in getting thrown into the fiery furnace they knew who they were. They were sons of God. And that could never be taken from them. Because you see the only thing that stays – since

“...God is God and God is good and I am a child of God and I am called to good. And the goodness of me that God has given is this little piece of heaven that gives me value.”

gold does not stay – the only thing that stays is not what is on you, but what is inside you. That’s the thing that stays.

And what’s this thing inside us? Why it’s our souls, right? Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were holding onto their souls, right? There was something about that statue that was going to do something to their souls. What does it profit a person if they gain the whole world and lose their soul? Jesus says. There’s something inside here, Jesus says. It’s your life, it’s your soul. And it’s precious and it’s fragile and it’s susceptible. And you must protect it. You must cherish it. And you must realize how vulnerable it is. And so when someone asks you to bow, best you check your soul. Don’t let anyone mess with your soul.

Rabbi Harold Kushner relays the parable of the West African tribe who noticed one day that their milk was disappearing. It seemed that everyday more and more of their milk was gone. So they had one of their young members stay up to see if possibly someone was stealing their milk. So in the middle of the night the young man saw a moonbeam come down from the sky and a beautiful sky maiden walk down the moonbeam. She milked the cows into the pails and quietly took the pails up the moonbeam into heaven. He couldn’t believe what he saw. So the next night he stayed up and there she came again. Down the moonbeam and then up the moonbeam with more pails of milk. He was entranced not only by her brazenness, but more so by her beauty. The third night he set a trap and caught her. “Let me go,” cried the maiden. “I will let you go, if you promise to marry me,” said the young man. “I will marry you if you let me go back to heaven for three days. Then I will come back and marry you.” The young man concedes. The maiden disappears and three days she returns on her moonbeam carrying a box. And she says, “I will marry you upon the condition that you never open this box.” And he agreed. And they

married and lived a wonderful life together until one day when she was not around curiosity got the better of him and he found her box and he opened it. And inside he could see nothing. He closed the box and returned it to its spot.

When his wife came home she knew right away (why is it always the case that wives know right away) – and she went to her husband and said, “Why did you open the box?” He said, “I was curious.” She said, “Then you cannot be my husband.” “What’s the big deal?” he said, “There’s nothing inside the box.” “Now you really can’t be my husband. Because what you could not see was that my box was full of heaven. And what is nothing to you is heaven to me.”

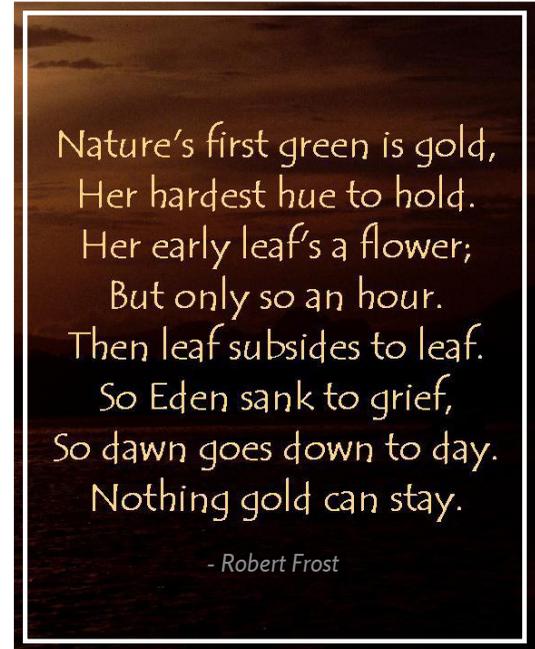
What is nothing to you is heaven to me.

And so when they asked Jesus about the kingdom of heaven and where it might be – he said, “No need to look far, the kingdom of heaven is inside you.” You’ve got this box, you see. You got this soul, and it’s the place where heaven is supposed to reside. It is this invisible treasure that you hold – this knowledge of God Calvin talked about – that everyone brings with them from heaven. It is this deep down sense that God is God and God is good and I am a child of God and I am called to good. And the goodness of me that God has given is this little piece of heaven that gives me value. And yet there are these forces in the world that would just as soon open the box and take it away. Because they can’t see what we see. And they would just as soon have us bow down to 90 feet of gold, or to a rising stock market, or to the 2018 model of this and that, or to the latest Amazon Echo, or to whatever piece of stuff that will someday end up in a garage sale. And they’ll tell you that Christmas just won’t be complete without it. And what they won’t tell you is that what made Christmas complete was this little baby that came down the moonbeam born to the virgin in Bethlehem. The one that brought heaven to earth in a dusty old manger. The one

who came that we wouldn’t forget that there is this precious heaven inside each of us. And it’s so easy to give it away. It’s so easy to sell your soul to the highest bidder. It’s so easy to bow down to whatever statue they put in front of you. But this box you got – oh it holds something dear, something more valuable than 24 karats. It’s your life. It’s the only thing that lasts forever. Why even the cross can’t take it away.

So when those wise, wise ones of long ago came to that dusty place and found the swaddled messenger from heaven – no surprise then that they laid before him gold. They surrendered their gold. As if to say, nothing gold can stay. As if to save their souls.

That’s where the hope lies, right? This little light of hope we’ve lit today? It’s inside here. Inside the box. It’s that little piece of heaven that nobody knows but you. You and that baby coming down from heaven. The little, little goldless baby before whom all of heaven and earth shall someday bow.



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Church of the Palms

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