

A Treasure in the Closet – John 15: 26-27, 16: 4b-15
Sermon prepared and preached by Rev. Don Hammond
For First Central Congregational UCC Omaha, Nebraska
May 31, 2009 – Pentecost Sunday

Jack and Ann lived in their house at the top of a high ridge in Honolulu, Hawaii. It was one of those locations where just about anyone would want to live. Their view of Diamond Head and all of Honolulu was breathtaking. They lived there most of their married lives, and raised all five of their children in that house. It was probably one of the most idyllic places that I have ever been. Now they were in their early 80's, and with the house being more than they could physically handle, they chose to live in a UCC full-care retirement community across the street from the church and the Punaho School, where all their children attended.

Jack was a retired businessman. His professional life was what most people would identify as "successful," but he had no ambitions to retire, so he became the Administrator of the church. During my two years as Senior Interim Pastor I got to know Jack and Ann well; after all, Jack and I worked together. What I admired most about Jack were his impeccable ethics and his humility. He was the kind of man that anyone would be pleased to know or, even better, to be his friend. Jack and Ann always enjoyed friends.

Jack was quiet and humble, but since he was born in Honolulu, he did boast about being the oldest surviving baptized member of the congregation, which was about the only thing he ever boasted about. In time I learned that there was much, much more that he could have boasted about. His daughter-in-law is the famous movie actress Sigourney Weaver, but he rarely said anything about that. He and Ann were personal trusted friends of Jack and Marjorie Lord, of the Hawaii Five O television series, and I learned that only when Marjorie died. He and Ann were also close personal friends of Author and Kathryn Murray. For the sake of those of you who are too young to know those names, the Murrays were famous dancers and had a long running syndicated television *The Arthur*

Murray Party, in the 1950's and 60's. For some of you, television is that thing that looks like a computer but isn't.

One evening Jack and Ann invited me to dinner at their house, and during conversation told me the most interesting story. Jack, Ann, and the Murrays spent a lot of time at each other's homes. One evening while visiting at the Murray's home, Jack made a comment about a painting on the wall that he enjoyed. The Murrays took it off the wall, and told him to take it home and enjoy it on one of their walls for a while and that is what happened. Jack said that after some time, he simply became tired of looking at it, took it down and placed it in a closet where it was kept for a while. One day, he said, he discovered what he had in his closet. It was an original painting by a French artist and I believe he said it was either a Chardin or a Monet. I might be incorrect with the artists name, nevertheless, I do vividly recall what he said next: that painting was worth more than his ridge-top house with its spectacular view. Upon his discovery of the Treasure in his Closet, he immediately took it out of the closet and returned it to the owners.

Today's gospel lesson has Jesus telling the disciples about the *paraclete*, or *Holy Spirit*. The word "paraclete" is a Hebrew judicial term: "para" meaning "one called to the side of another to help," and "kaleo," "to call." The "paraclete," or "Holy Spirit" is much like an advocate or a defense attorney for the disciples.

The disciples of Jesus were clueless about what they were to do next. They were ready to go forward, but without a clue of how they were going to do that. That is when Jesus assured them that there will always be a Spirit or "Paraclete" that will come to their defense. And like a defense attorney who is bound to work within the parameters of the law and to speak the truth, the "paraclete" will be bound to work within Jesus' teachings and always be bound to the telling of truth.

What this means for the disciples, and to everyone who commits themselves to being a follower of Jesus, is that there is one who opens the door to the closet and tells the truth about the treasure that lies within. The Holy Spirit is the one who commissions and directs the hidden treasures to be liberated from

the darkness of the recesses of the closets and has them placed in the hands of those to whom the treasures belong.

Our treasures are really not our own. As you already know, I have been the pastor of many congregations, because interim pastors have a wide circulation. I have noticed a truth that every single congregation has in common. In every congregation there are people who are known to show up nearly every Sunday morning, but have little, if any, involvement in anything else in the church. I have been known to open that matter in some congregations, and I always get the same response: "Oh, that is Jane or Jack or Cy or Sally. Those folks are happy to worship and leave everything else to someone else." In one congregation I served there was a man who was known as "Silent Floyd." Silent Floyd worshiped regularly and supported the church financially, but never was part of anything else in the church. When it came time for Board nominations I would suggest "Silent Floyd" and would always hear the same response, "Oh, Floyd only wants to worship. He is too busy to do anything else." As it turned out the only reason Floyd never did anything within the church was because no one asked him to do anything. I understand he was eventually asked to be on the Capital Campaign Committee and did great job for the church.

In many ways we are partners with the "paraclete", the Holy Spirit. We are in partnership to open closet doors, and help bring out the treasures that are stuffed in the back and hard to find places. In every congregation there are Treasures in the Closets. There are people with treasures of skills and abilities that have never been discovered or set loose. There are people with a treasure of organizational and teaching skills that are still in the dark. There are people with passions for ministries that we are involved in, and ministries that have not even been thought about. There are people with a treasure of visions, ideas, and dreams that never see the light of day because they have not experienced the partnership we have with the "paraclete;" no one ever asked anything of them.

For a time in my life I studied Fundraising Management at the University of Washington Extension. One of the instructors was a prolifically successful Development Director at a major hospital. He was filled with insights about the

art of fundraising. One of the jewels he shared was this: one of the greatest mistakes a fundraiser can make is to decide for someone else what that person is capable of doing. An illustration he gave was of the time he approached a couple for a major donation. He did all his homework, and was certain his request was within the abilities of the couple to donate. He did "the ask" and they wrote a check for what he asked. They followed that check by saying that they expected to be asked for, and were prepared to do, much more.

The story I am about to tell has a prelude. I told this story at an ecumenical Thanksgiving Service. One of the other clergy was a woman Episcopal Priest. When the service concluded, she asked me if I remembered her name. "Of course, Fran," I responded. "No, my full name," she asked. "Yes, Fran Stanford." With that she informed me that she is part of the Leland Stanford family, and the story I told was a family story, and no one really knows if it is true. Nevertheless, it is a good story.

Leland and Jan Stanford we know as the founders of Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. What you may not know is that their only son, Leland Stanford, Jr. was a student at Harvard University. Leland Stanford, Jr. died while he was a student at Harvard. Leland and Jane wanted to give a gift to the university as a memorial to their son. They made an appointment to talk to the President of the University, and arrived that morning in their homespun clothes. The President's secretary did not want to bother the President and his important business with this unusual couple, and delayed their meeting for several hours, in anticipation that they would give-up and go away, but they waited. The President decided to have a quick meeting with them. He expected to hear that they wanted to erect a statue, or something like that, for their son. They told him they would like to donate money to the university for a memorial. The President explained how they could not possibly erect statues for every student who died. The Stanfords responded that they did not have a statue in mind but rather a building. The President looked at that plain couple and said "Do you have any idea how much a new building would cost?" The Stanfords were surprised at the cost, and then told the President that instead of donating a new building, they

would build a new university, and that is how Stanford University began. Never make an assumption or decision for another person about what they can do. Never assume that in a dark corner of someone's closet that there can not possibly be any great treasure. Never assume that someone does not have a great treasure within that can make any significant difference in this world or to the world that God is creating. We are the "paracletes" assistants, and the Holy Spirit works best when we work **with** the Holy Spirit.

There is also the other side. Often people convince themselves that they cannot possibly be one that holds any great treasure. Even when closet doors are unlocked, there are some who will not hear of it, convinced that it cannot possibly be them.

We receive newsletter from other congregations here at the church, and I like to read them. Most often they are kind of uneventful, but sometimes I find a jewel. A few months ago I read one from First Lutheran Church in Omaha and the pastor's article is rich. She signed it "Pastor Judith." Here is what she wrote.

"When my friend's son, Jay, was in first grade my friend got a call from his teacher. Jay's grades were falling and he was having trouble paying attention. The teacher and the school nurse had met and decided to ask my friend to have her son's hearing tested because he didn't appear to hear well.

She made an appointment with the doctor and Jay had the hearing test. They waited in the doctor's private office so that they could learn the diagnosis. The doctor came in looking very grim and sat down on the edge of his desk. Then he broke the news to them, 'I think that Jay is hard of listening.'

The "paraclete" comes. The paraclete's assistant comes and does everything to assure you that you have a treasure in the closet, and how desperately it is needed to be brought out into the light of day. Sometimes the greatest obstacle to the release of treasures in the closet is that a person is "hard of listening." It can be something that a person does not want to hear or even believe, that a treasure could be in their closet.

Jesus told his disciples that they would lead the world into a change that would make the world into what God wants it to be. Yes, you are uncertain how you can do that, but worry not, because the “paraclete” is on the way, as are the paraclete’s assistants. All that you will need to do is open the closet door and let the treasure out, and by doing that, the treasure will be set loose and will find its way back into the hands to whom it belongs, and it belongs to our God.

Amen.