

Sermon for All Saints' Sunday

The Rev. Brooks Cato

I don't know if it's where I grew up or how, but I have, deep in my heart, a real love of garage sales. Admittedly, it's always kinda interesting to see the interior of someone else's garage, from the pegboarded hyper-organized to the explosion of 30 years worth of junk. It's also a fun way to meet your neighbors or random people that live on your normal driving route. A garage sale is like a once-in-a-lifetime sneak peak into other people's lives. I love trying to figure out the darkest corners of their psyche based on what's up for grabs. Like, what can I tell about this person based off of their extensive collection of Precious Moments figurines? Or better yet, what can I tell about this person because they're getting rid of their Precious Moments figurines? Are those commemorative presidential inauguration plates indicative of some nefarious secret? Does the everything-for-a-dime table reveal some deep, dark mystery? What does it all mean? Oh, the drama of it all!

In reality, though, you end up getting to know whoever's exploded their junk from its hiding spaces to the driveway a little better, and most of the time it's a cool way to grow your faith in humanity. Garage sale people want to bargain, on both sides. They get rid of something they don't want or need anymore, you get it for a greatly discounted price, and everyone wins. When we were kids, Mom used to let us do garage sales once a year, usually around the middle of summer when we were too bored to avoid it any longer. With four kids and two treasure-hunting adults, the house had a way of accumulating more than it could hold. We'd stay up late the night before, cleaning up the garage, slapping stickers on items, hanging signs around the neighborhood, and making sure we had enough coins to make small change. We had to be up early, 'cause the real serious garage salers expected the doors to open at sunup, and we'd make the bulk of our deals then. We also had to hide some of our items until after well-intentioned extended family members came and went. See, some of them were generous gift givers, though not always the most in tune with our tastes. There was a clear pipeline from the Home Shopping Network to grandma's wrapping paper to our garage sales, but she was none the wiser...or, at least she pretended to be none the wiser.

Whatever we made on garage sale day was ours to keep, usually spread across the four kids evenly, unless one of us sold a big ticket item -- then whoever was lucky enough to get rid of their lava lamp or old suit would pocket the extra five or ten bucks themselves. We'd inevitably spend our profits in a week or two on new CDs or at someone else's garage sale. It's funny, putting on our own garage sales instilled a love for other people's, too, and it's still hard for me to drive past one as an adult, though, admittedly, I'm less likely to be drawn to surfaces that aren't lysol-able this year. We found many treasures rummaging through other people's stuff. There's one such treasure in my office, actually. There's more in my house. I still wear a treasure or two passed down for a nickel from someone else, who may have gotten it from someone else, first.

Of all those treasure hunters, though, my mother is tops. But she doesn't go in looking for resale value or rare items; she goes in looking for things to match her aesthetic. From old spinning wheels to whiskey barrels and cotton cards, there's a very particular look she's going for. Old and rustic and something that's moved from being useful to being antiquated and neglected. A little mineral oil and mom's keen eye for location, and voila, that cigar mold mantle piece becomes the talk of the HOA! But of all the treasures my treasure-hunting momma has found, I think the greatest is the Family Bible. It's a massive cornerstone of a book, heavy and delicate with age. Bound sometime in the 1800s, this old tome traces a family we never knew, at least not outside of a driveway bargain exchange. I don't know the circumstances under which mom got this Bible, but I know she saw something in it too dear to leave for the bargain bin.

Some of y'all may have Family Bibles or at least be familiar with the concept, but for those that don't or aren't, the tradition started a few hundred years ago with substantial Bibles so big they'd need to be read from a table or a stand. The first owner wrote in their name and date of birth or when they got the thing, and then one generation passed the Good Book down to the next. New dates and new names entered fill the first page or two,

and by the time a modern reader inherits the aging thing, they can trace their lineage and the history of that book back, sometimes as far as George Washington's presidency. One of the oldest Family Bibles in the US even has a recipe for a homemade itch salve made with turpentine and hog lard scribbled beside an illustration of Jesus arguing with doctors! But my family wasn't among the first settlers, and we definitely didn't have the long-rooted history of belt-buckle shoes and pilgrim hats. We came from good, church-going stock, but our Bibles were smaller, more portable things. They could rush from Arkansas to Oklahoma or Texas with the change of the seasons. They could dry a clover or a wildflower between their pages, delightful surprises of the habits of someone long gone staining Christ's words with the yellow of a black-eyed Susan or the red of an Indian Paintbrush. The closest thing we had to a Family Bible was my grandpa's well-read King James. It has a kitschy bookmark from God knows when, a newspaper clipping of his obituary, and more of those pressed flowers than I can count. Faded treasures, all.

But that big Family Bible mom got at the garage sale, it's a treasure in its own right. No, she didn't have a sentimental attachment to it like I do with grandpa's Bible, but she still saw the treasure before her. And when she bought it and brought it home, displayed it on a shelf in the living room, and showed off it's pages with gentle turns and supported spine, something changed. Someone else's Bible, someone else's family's story, someone else's history, became a part of ours. That book has moved with her, traced place by place, and one day it will move from her possession to one of us kids, and our names will fill its pages. And one day it will pass from us to another generation. Maybe one day it'll end up on a garage sale table and find its way into another family's home. But still, it traces a story, a story with a straight line, sometimes. And a story with some wiggle to it where we might not expect.

Now I know this has been a hard year, Lord do I know that. It's a bittersweet thing for All Saints' to roll around with this old church so empty. We've been going for a mighty long time, our church, but not without some of that wiggle of our own. We've traced lineages and passed wisdom through generations. We've handed our church down from parent to child, and we've had some additions come in that we never expected. Our church has been held by some obvious characters and some we never would've anticipated. And we've made it to now. Back in the 1800s, the folks that founded this church likely never imagined where we'd be today. But they imagined that we would be. They may not have imagined their own offspring nearly two hundred years later making up this body, but they certainly imagined someone, here, filling this village with the love of Christ and living into that Holy Word.

These days, sometimes it can be hard to have faith in much of anything. Our world is all sorts of twisted up on itself, and hope for the future can feel a little like haggling with fate. Even our treasures can feel dulled or inaccessible. But y'all, there's something about that garage sale Family Bible that's stirring me up. There's a sadness that it wasn't wanted in its original home, yes, but I love that whoever wanted to rid themselves of it didn't just toss it in the trash or use its pages for firestarter. Whoever put it out on that table wanted it to find a home where it would be loved, and when my mother came along, it did just that. It took on a new life and has touched three generations since. It changed place, but it stayed constant and true throughout. Our church looks very different from how it did a year ago. I never imagined inheriting a system from the corporate world to worship by, but here we are, new owners of videoconferencing worship. It's a wiggle in our history, but it's still our story, constant and true even now.

I miss those garage sale days, where I could waltz partway into a stranger's home without a care for surfaces touched or masks worn, but I'm learning, I think, that what I treasured so much about those forays into curiosity and bargain hunting wasn't really the stuff I picked up. It was the connection to people. If I were a better person, I'd probably be talking about the interaction with the person sitting bored in their camping chair with a bank bag filled with ones and quarters. And sure, that's neat enough. But I'm talking about the connection to people long gone through something older than brittle plastic toys and beaten up card tables. I'm

talking about the hands that held an old pair of pliers, the wrist that bore a watch stuck at 6:17, the shoulders that filled a duster coat, and the fingers that turned crisp, old pages. There's history in the words, sure, but there's stories in the stains, the tears, and the dog ears. Much of who we are has that same kind of history and those same kinds of stories. Markers of where we've been, stained and torn and dog-eared lives that somehow ended up with all of us in this same body, in our same book. Wild and tame stories told together that bring us to this exact moment, told together for a time, diverging when time or circumstance take us away, retold down the line by someone we'd expect to still be here or someone we'd never imagine picking up where we leave off. There's so much mystery to a life lived for God, so many glorious treasures to be found and shared and passed along. A hundred years from now, two hundred years from now, some saint'll take up these treasures and tell our story, the story of saints once lived told to saints yet to come. That's our Family Bible, the Family Bible of St. Thomas', with stories of lives once lived, lives yet to be lived, and your lives lived now. All of 'em, all of you, treasures told by the story of God.