



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

July 31, 2016

“Downsizing the Stuff of Our Lives

(Luke 12:15)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Lk. 12:15).

COLLECT: O Lord, grant us wisdom to recognize the treasures You have stored up for us in heaven, that we may never despair but always rejoice and be thankful for the riches of Your grace; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, Our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

About a month ago, we helped my wife's parents move from a large ranch home in Merton, to a small apartment for seniors in Madison. Months before the move, they started downsizing and getting rid of stuff. They worked diligently at it, their home in Merton becoming more and more austere. Still . . . just days before the move. . . there was a lot more stuff than they could take. There was no time for a garage sale or estate sale, so Dad contracted with a company that takes it all, sells what they can, and gives a portion back, probably for pennies on the dollar compared to original cost. It was interesting. In the crunch of time and space, suddenly lots of stuff had no value anymore. None. A perfectly good rake. A heavy duty vice. A table and chairs. Wine glasses. An entertainment center. Bowls. A gas grill. A large Toro snow blower for which he paid well over a thousand dollars.

I'm sure at one time these purchases gave them at least a little pleasure as they brought them home. But now in the frenzy of a move, they were just things to get rid of, stuff that had value, but no longer to them. I particularly felt bad about that snow blower. I said, "I don't know, dad, maybe you should try to sell it on Craigslist." He shot back, "You can sell it." He was done. He was washing his hands of it. He was okay with pennies on the dollar, so long as he didn't have to look at it, lift it, or move it.

There comes a time when the stuff of our lives loses its value. Either we give it away or it is taken away. But there comes a time when it is of absolutely no worth to us. And the biblical argument is we should know that well in

advance, and live accordingly, setting our minds on things above, not on earthly things.

In the Old Testament lesson, we hear the familiar words, “I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I poured my effort and skill under the sun.”

I don’t know who has that snow blower, or for how cheap he bought it, but I know chances are very slim he or she will maintain it as well as Gail’s father did. And the same might be true for the house you’re selling, and the apple trees behind the house. Or the business that you worked so hard to grow. Or the farm. Even when we pass things on to our children, there are no guarantees they’ll take care of it. You might show them how. You might tell them why it’s important. But they may have other priorities. When children receive an inheritance check, within 48 hours, the vast majority of them can be found at a car dealership kicking tires . . . even when their parents always bought used!

Sooner or later we all lose control over the stuff of life, our money, our possessions. Sooner or later we have to give it away, or it is taken away. Sooner or later, we become penniless. It’s best we come to terms with that truth, and not let the stuff become an idol.

That’s also the point of our Gospel lesson. One day, about two thousand years ago, Jesus had been teaching a crowd when a man interrupted and changed the topic. “Teacher” he said, “tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me” (Lk. 12:9ff.). The ugly dispute is all too familiar: haggling over furniture, dishes, silverware, house, land, and savings left by the deceased. But Jesus doesn’t want to be a referee. This is not why he had come. “Watch out!” he says. “Be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” Then he goes on to tell an unsettling little parable.

“The land of a rich man produced plentifully.” Notice, it’s not the rich man who is producing plentifully. It’s the land. Sun, soil and rain join together to make for a bountiful harvest. Trouble is he’ll have no place to store it. And so he says, “I know what I’ll do. I’ll build bigger barns!” Can you sense his glee, his exuberance? “I’m going to make a killing out there. And then . . . I’m going to retire and relax. I’m going to eat and drink and be merry.”

Notice, he’s not breaking any laws. He’s no criminal. He hasn’t stolen from his workers or mistreated them. He’s careful and conservative. We wouldn’t look on this man as a bad man. We might even assume him wise and intelligent because he has all this wealth. So if he’s not a criminal, what is he? He’s a fool, the text says. Why? First this: he lives completely for himself. He talks to himself, plans for himself, congratulates himself. In the Greek the words I and my are used twelve times in just three sentences. It’s all about him. He has no concern about returning to God a portion of the generosity he’s received. He has no concern toward helping the greater world in need. It’s all about him.

He’s also a fool because he’s shortsighted. He assumes he will have many years to enjoy his wealth. The quote, already well known in Jesus’ day, was: “Let us eat, drink and be merry . . . for tomorrow we die.” As Jesus tells the parable, though, the rich man intentionally leaves off that last part about dying. This guy plans to just eat, drink and be merry, period. None of that dying stuff! He doesn’t want to think about that. There will be time for that later. But that very night God would require his soul. Then what will become of all his stuff? Then what will become of him? Job chapter 20: “The joy of the godless lasts but a moment” (v. 5). Jesus ends the parable not with a warning, but with a threat: “This is how it will be for the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.” Jesus is looking us right in the eyes and he’s not blinking.

I remember one of my professors telling us when you have threatening text like this one, part of your job is to remind people that these are not your ideas that you just

came up with on your own. These are the words of Jesus. So you hold up the biblical text in front of you as a deflection shield and you peer around it, and you say, “This isn’t me talking. This is Jesus.”

Why does Jesus come down so hard on covetousness? First, it disregards the needs of others. But even worse, in the Bible it’s a form of idolatry. We grasp after things as a means of securing our future. This anxiety reflects a lack of trust in God. In Colossians 3, Paul writes, “Put to death what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness which is idolatry” (v. 5).

Covetousness is also a direct path to a fearful and unsatisfying life. “If you love money” Proverbs says, “you’ll never have enough of it.” That’s why some athletes, already crazy rich, still hold out before signing a new contract . . . because they feel they could always use a little more. You and I feel the same, don’t we? We could use a little more. Therefore we’re reluctant to give it away, either to God in gratitude or to neighbor in need.

The Large Catechism says money is the most common idol on earth. The one who has money feels secure as if already in Paradise. The one who doesn’t have it feels despondent, as if God doesn’t exist (LC 1 7-8). So money can just as easily become the idol of the poor as well as the rich. It’s an idol that will come crashing down at some point.

So what do you do? Every day you remind yourself that your possessions are as fleeting as your life. Here today; gone tomorrow. God has given them to us for a time to use wisely, and to share generously with him (God) and with the neighbor in need.

Giving it away also puts the stuff of our lives in its place. Every time we give it away generously, it’s shattering the idol that always wants to rise up in our hearts. So God teaches us to tithe, not because God needs it, but because we do. A tithe, ten percent of what we receive from him, is our last defense against a world bent on turning us into that fool

in our parable. A tithe says to the idol of material possessions, “You may own 90% of me, but you’re not going to own all of me. With this gift to the Lord, I draw the line. I leave some space for God.” With a tithe, we say to the gods of money and possessions, “You don’t have me yet. I am giving at least a fraction of my life back to the one who gave all of his to me.” Giving it away reminds us what money can and cannot do for us. If money could save us from sin and death, we could never give it away. So giving it away is an act of confessing Jesus as our Savior. Our possessions are transitory. Jesus reigns forever. So turn to him daily, and love him more, and trust him more, than anything that is evidently and tangibly yours.

My wife recently read “The Life-changing Magic of Tidying Up.” It’s by Japanese author Marie Kondo. It’s on the New York Times best selling list. It’s not about finding better ways to store stuff. It’s about getting rid of stuff and de-cluttering our lives. Obviously many are finding her methods to be very helpful. One of the things she teaches her readers is to take each object in hand and decide if it brings you a spark of joy. If it doesn’t bring you that spark of joy, you get rid of it. I guess that’s where Gail’s parents were in the rush of downsizing. Few of their possessions were giving that spark of joy anymore. Of course, at death, there will be no more sparks of joy to be found in our stuff. That’s why it’s so important to find our joy elsewhere, namely in Jesus Christ.

This parable was about a fool who was not rich toward God. But the teller of the parable is the Son of God who has certainly been rich toward us. Out of love for us, he held nothing back. We have the hoarding instinct of the rich fool, but thanks be to God we also have Savior who has a giving instinct, who gave it all, poured it all out on the cross, a Savior. We can make no claims on him; we have no right to demand anything from him. Yet he gives it to us freely. In John, Jesus said, “I give them eternal life.” Salvation has always been a gift that cannot be purchased with our money, only given by his grace. In Isaiah, the Lord

tells us the same. “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come buy wine and milk without money and without price . . . Give ear and come to me that your soul may live” (Is. 55:1ff).

Clearly God doesn't covet our silver or gold, our precious heirlooms or our land. He covets us. He's not greedy for possessions but for people. He doesn't want to save money; he wants to save mankind. Jewels and gems mean nothing to him. He can make more. He treasures you. He did for you what money could never do. He died for you. Not with gold or silver but with his precious blood he purchased salvation for you. Therefore in our epistle lesson, Paul says, “Seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on earthly things” (Col. 3:1-2).

In contrast to your stuff, his death and resurrection will never be taken from you. In contrast to your stuff which thieves steal, and moth and rust destroy . . . in contrast to your stuff, life with him does not decay over time, and cannot be stolen from you.

Some of your stuff may for a moment provide a brief and elusive spark of joy, like lightening bugs at dusk. But heaven is a place where the joy is effusive, not elusive. Heaven is a place where there is not a spark of light, but rather bright endless day, for the Lamb is its Lamp. Your stuff may give you flashes of fond memories. But Jesus gives you the promise of an eternal future. Your stuff may deceive you into feelings of security. But Jesus is your Rock, your Fortress, your Salvation. Surrounding yourself with your stuff may make you feel at home, but heaven is your home, a place of unending joy, of everlasting happiness, of infinite gratitude, and unceasing praise. Amen.

