
Where Your Heart Is

Luke 12.32-40

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 8, 2010 by the Revd Nancy Ferree-Clark

In today's gospel lesson Jesus speaks to his disciples about their relationship with material possessions. As he does at many points throughout Luke's gospel, he explains that their stance toward possessions is a very important indicator of their relationship to God, if not *the* most important. I know some of you are probably thinking I chose this text to preach on just so that Jesus could step on your toes one more time before I leave Duke Chapel, but I can promise you that was not the case. My toes are being stepped on just as much as yours! Let me explain why.

In the summer of 1977, I and my two housemates gave a going away party for ourselves as we prepared to move from the west coast to the east. It was an unusual party in that our main intention was to give all our possessions away. Since we were traveling back east via railroad on a 6 week trip across Canada, all we really needed was our backpacks, a little clothing, and some camping gear. As we tried to figure out what to do with all our possessions, it occurred to us that we could simply give them away to neighbors and friends. Even though our stuff was not very valuable, we easily found grateful owners for everything, including a horrible pink couch that had a large indentation in its arm, just the right shape for someone's head to rest on. We were sure no one would want it, but alas, someone fell in love with it and hauled it away. As we spent our final night in the house in sleeping bags on the floor, we felt free as a bird. We never knew giving our stuff away could be so much fun.

Almost 33 years to the day since that trip, several days ago I found myself packing up to move cross country again, this time from east to west. However, this time my goal wasn't to give everything away but to pack my family's belongings into a very large moving van to transport to our new home in Tacoma, Washington. Surrounded by countless boxes of books, dishes, clothes, linens, music, furniture, electronic devices, stacks of fabric I had intended to use for quilting but never got around to, and a wide variety of keepsakes, plus two pianos and an organ, I couldn't help wondering, "What happened since the time I was able to put all my possessions in a 40 lb. backpack? Where did all this stuff come from?"

Apparently a lot of other people are also beginning to ask this question. Where *does* all of our stuff come from? A woman named Annie Leonard has created a 20 minute video entitled "The Story of Stuff". Since she posted it online two and a half years ago, it has been viewed by 12 million people and translated into 15 different languages. As an environmentalist, Annie Leonard wants to make us think twice about the things we buy. She uses stick figures and cartoons to give an enlightening analysis of our current environmental predicament and the way our patterns of consumption have contributed to it.

Annie Leonard helps her viewers understand the fact that we live in an economy based on increased production so we can increase consumption. Advertising is designed to increase our wants so that we're constantly shopping. Through things like "planned obsolescence", new needs are constantly being created. As demands increase, the economy grows. The assumption is that prosperity and more consumption makes us happy, and more possessions become an essential element of a successful life. We *are* what we consume. If we want to reach a better future, production and consumption must continually increase and everything must become bigger, faster, and more powerful to keep us all afloat. We have to keep accumulating more and more stuff. Or at least that's how it seems.

There are problems however with this way of living in the world. One is that not everybody is happy. Some people see that others have more than they have and they start to harbor feelings of envy, resentment, and even hatred that can lead to serious conflicts. As for those who possess the most, even they apparently aren't a lot happier than those who have less. Studies on happiness show that once people have their basic needs met, the level of happiness does not increase significantly for people with more stuff.

The other major problem with unrestrained consumption is that we now live on an overstuffed planet. Taking into account the decimation of natural resources, the presence of toxins in many products and the dangers they pose to us and the environment, and the huge challenges of disposing our stuff when we're finished with it, we have an environmental crisis on our hands. So how do we get off this merry-go-round of non-stop consumption and waste, things that are hurting our planet, our neighbors, and ourselves?

As a starting point, I suggest that we refer to the gospel of Luke. Without using economic terms like production and consumption, Jesus still has plenty to say about possessions. This is especially the case in Luke where he basically casts human salvation in terms of how we deal with money and property. Beginning with chapter 12, which our lesson is taken from today, we recognize the ways we can become too wrapped up in our possessions. In last week's gospel we heard the parable of the rich fool. Remember how he had such abundant crops he decided he should tear down his barns and build bigger ones in order to store all that he owned with nary a thought for he needs of his neighbor. So he kicked back and congratulated himself on how much stuff he had, saying to himself, "Relax, eat, drink and be merry!" What he didn't know was that his soul would be required of him that very night, and even though he may have had the most toys when he died, he still didn't win, as a popular bumper sticker used to suggest. So God said to him "And the things you have stored up, whose will they be? So it is for those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Right on the heels of this parable Luke shares Jesus' teaching on anxiety about possessions. "Do not worry", Jesus says, "Look at the birds. They neither sow nor reap, and yet God feeds them. How much more will God provide for you! "It is God's good pleasure to give to you in abundance," Jesus says. We don't need to worry and hoard possessions out of fear of not having enough. God gives us everything we need. Don't be anxious, Jesus tries his best to impress upon us.

So what do we do instead? Jesus says the answer depends on one thing. Where does your heart belong? Where do you really *want* your heart to belong, even if you know it doesn't completely at the moment? If you say you want your heart to belong to God—not just 50%, not just 75%, but 100% to God—then Jesus has a simple answer for you: "Sell your possessions and give alms to those in need." He said something very similar in a conversation later in Luke with a wealthy ruler. When the ruler asked how to be saved, Jesus said, "Go and sell everything you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then follow me" (Luke 18:18-25). But when the rich man heard this he became sad because he was very rich. He had too much to give it away and *missed* everything because he thought he *had* everything.

According to Jesus, "wherever your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Those who spend their time fretting about possessions make the choice to invest their hearts on earth. Or as Annie Leonard might put it, in things that stand a good chance of ending up in the garbage dump. Those who choose to trust in God's abundant provision so that they are free to receive the wealth that God can give are investing their hearts in heaven.

I've often heard in my years of church work that if we just get people's hearts right then the money will follow. But that's really just the opposite of Jesus' teaching. Jesus says to get your wallet right, and then hearts will follow. To whom do you want your heart to belong? Then put your money there.

Just as I learned from that cross-country moves years ago, it's a lot more fun to give away possessions than suffer through the headaches that go with owning, maintaining, insuring, storing, and moving it all from place to place. But what I've also learned in the years since then is that as time passes, we are shaped by our commitments and loyalties, which add up to a particular way of life. If you enjoy reading you're tempted to accumulate books. If you like to quilt you need fabric. If you live in a location where you can't walk to the places you need to go and don't have good public transportation, you will likely need a car, motorcycle, or bicycle. If you have children, you're trying to provide for their needs and discern the difference between what they truly need and what will only provide short-lived entertainment destined for the landfill.

Material possessions in and of themselves are *not* sinful, but they all too easily become the center of our lives such that there isn't any time left for God. It can get to the point that we don't own them; they own us!—and thus blind us to the critical needs of others. Possessions are gifts *from* God to be used for the purposes *of* God, including sharing what we have with those who do not have enough.

I recently came across the story of Hannah Salwen and her family described in a book she and her father wrote called "The Power of Half." At age 14 Hannah was a passenger in her father's car in Atlanta, Georgia, when she happened to notice at the same moment a homeless man on the street and a man driving a shiny Mercedes. She turned to her Dad and said, "Dad, if that man had a less nice car, that man *there* could have a meal." Until that day the Salwen parents had been consumed with providing for their children the best in life according to the classic American dream, but their daughter's comments stopped them short. The parents and their two teen-aged children began to ask themselves, "How can we make a difference in the lives of people who are hurting?" Their decision—which they made as a family—was to sell their house, buy another one half its size, and give half of the sale price to a worthy charity.

Since the home they sold was a large one, they took their substantial proceeds plus some additional funds and invested in a group called The Hunger Project. Their plan eventually took them across the globe and well out of their comfort zone. The Salwens loved the fact that giving away their money not only enabled people in small villages in Ghana to bring about needed change their related to hunger and education, but also that the Salwens themselves had changed. Now they were not only a lot closer to each other but their hearts were invested in the welfare of people and not simply in a house.

Hannah's extraordinary powers of perception are instructive for us as we look around our own neighborhoods and cities. One of the most devastating results of the recent recession is joblessness for millions of Americans. Current statistics show that one in 6 of us are unemployed or underemployed, and it looks like it's going to be this way for a while. How does a Christian respond to such pervasive need? Have we grown numb to the needs of suffering neighbors? Or do we have a heart that is ready to lay up treasure in heaven by sharing what we have?

At the beginning of today's gospel we heard four words, and they are four of the most important in the whole Bible: do not be afraid. Elsewhere Jesus has told us not be afraid in the middle of a raging storm, or in the dark of night, or when a ghost appears after his resurrection. This time he is saying do not be afraid to take the leap of faith by giving away our earthly treasures and investing in the kingdom of heaven with all our heart.

I believe that many people in this congregation are generous and want to be more generous, but the fears in our lives are real, and it seems our faith in God and anxieties about material things are intertwined all together. Who isn't worried about savings for retirement and college tuition, health care costs, declining real estate values and stock portfolios, getting or keeping a good job? These have a bearing on the ways we attempt to provide security for ourselves and our families.

Jesus does not deny what life can do to us. He just wants to give us the kingdom of heaven and all the love, joy, peace, and hope that accompany it, the kind of treasures where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. Our true security lies in the fundamental truth that the reign of God is near, closer than we realize, and that makes all the difference. If you believe that Jesus will return to complete his reign on earth, then be alert and dressed for action, as Luke tells us. That's another way of saying that our best intentions aren't worth much when they are only intentions. For us to be ready to receive God's kingdom, we have to divest ourselves of anything that would be an obstacle on the way to entering that kingdom, and we should do it now. Besides, there is no ultimate security in our accumulation of earthly treasure. Haven't you heard, there are no pockets in a shroud?

If you believe in the kingdom of heaven, you will make room in your life to receive it. If, however, you believe what makes the world go around is chance, or human aggressiveness, or the laws of supply and demand, then Jesus' words make little sense. The reality of God's rule over the world is the only justifiable reason for a carefree attitude toward life's necessities and the willingness to share our possessions with the poor.

On the days when you need to be reminded of this, just go outside and watch the birds in the sky. They neither sow nor reap; yet God cares for them, the seemingly most carefree of all God's creatures. Of how much more value are you than the birds! Remember that life is a gift from God, both to be treasured and to be shared. God will provide for us, and through us, God will provide for others.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, may you know the joy that goes with giving your stuff away and the freedom that God grants those who trust in Him alone. Most important of all, may your heart always belong to Him. Amen.