

## STORING UP TREASURES

*Script for Sermon Preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, July 31, 2016*

*Ordinary 18 – HCC, 9:30 a.m.*

*“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”*

Scripture Reading: Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”



There are times in the life of every preacher when the Sunday scripture really hits home. Today is one of those days in my life. Today I'm preaching on Jesus' warning that life does not consist in an abundance of possessions. Earlier this morning, Mary and I welcomed a new possession into our home: a new chair for the family room. This coming week, I will welcome a new possession of my own: a new piece of luggage for our upcoming travels.

A long time ago, a very long time ago, there were two men who had problems with wealth and possessions. The one man—the one who addressed Jesus directly—was troubled because his brother wouldn't divide the family inheritance with him. So he asked Jesus to intervene—much as the Israelites in the wilderness frequently asked Moses to intervene in their family disputes.

There was nothing wrong with this man's request for justice in receiving his fair share of the family inheritance. But Jesus sensed that there was more to this man's request than met the eye. Jesus sensed that for this man at least, the problem was not so much justice as it was covetousness. And so, in refusing to intervene in a family dispute, Jesus used this incident as a teaching opportunity, not only for the man, but also for the crowd of followers and would-be followers.

The meaning of life, Jesus said to his hearers, does not consist in an abundance of possessions. (In this there are echoes of the story of Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler, Mark 10:17-27, where this wealthy person went away grieving, because he could not divest himself of his many possessions in order to follow Jesus and “have treasure in heaven.”)

Jesus then told a parable about a self-centered rich man who stored up treasures for himself, but was not rich toward God, and when he died unexpectedly, his full barns could not save him. The problem was not his wealth. The problem wasn't his first-century 401-K. The problem wasn't the success of his crops. The problem wasn't even the size of his barns.

The problem for this man was his focus on himself. In his conversation with himself, he revealed that he was concerned only for the life of ease afforded him by his abundant possessions. “Relax, eat, drink, be merry.” His love for his possessions stood in the way of his love for God and neighbor. Which, according to Jesus, is a problem.

In a sermon she preached on this parable a few years ago, Barbara Brown Taylor said, “The only reason I am way ahead of this parable is because I know it is about me, but knowing that does not seem to filter down to doing anything much about it. Like many of you, I am waist deep in treasure that I know won't save me, but that does not stop me from setting my sights on one more trinket to add to my cache. Furthermore, the culture in which I live sees nothing wrong with this quest. In fact, the culture in which I live *depends* on it.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor, “Treasure Hunt: Luke 12:13-21,” *Review & Expositor*, January 1, 2002, 100. Accessed online on July 28, 2016.

(Do you remember President Bush, not long after the traumatic events of 9/11, urging Americans to go shopping?)

Jesus is, without a doubt, a demanding teacher. He has high expectations for his followers. He's not shy about putting forth those high expectations, sometimes directly, as in "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed." Sometimes he'll put forth his high expectations indirectly, in the form of a parable, as in, "The land of a rich man produced abundantly."

Even though Jesus' high expectations of his followers, as they are handed down to us in scripture, are abundantly clear, they're not always easy to live up to. And so we try to soften them to fit more comfortably with the times in which we live. Or we simply ignore them. We think that life does consist in an abundance of possessions.

A case in point is the so-called Prosperity Gospel, which is a distortion and perversion of the Gospel, but which is nonetheless quite popular in these times in which we live. According to the principles of the prosperity gospel, God wants all of us to be wealthy. According to the preachers of the prosperity gospel, we don't have to be on guard against all kinds of greed. Quite the contrary. Life does consist in the abundance of wealth and possessions, according to this egregious distortion of Jesus' message and ministry. The bumper sticker theology of the prosperity gospel boils down to this: Whoever has the most toys at the end wins. Which is of course the exact opposite of what Jesus teaches.

Now I'm not a purveyor of the prosperity gospel. I don't consider myself to be any more or less greedy than my fellow human beings. But I do have an abundance of possessions. In fact, like many of us, I have too much stuff. So I'm starting to think about divesting myself of the stuff I don't really need or want.

On a practical level, my guide for this process of divestment will be the *New York Times* bestselling book *the life-changing magic of tidying up – the Japanese art of decluttering and organizing* by Marie Kondo. The book is all about decluttering one's home. I see it as a stepping stone to decluttering my life.

On a spiritual level, I see this downsizing and divesting and decluttering and donating process as a way to avoid being one of those "who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." I don't expect this process to be easy. I hope to achieve a kind of harmonious balance between attachment to my personal treasures and attraction toward God.

On a church level, I see a similar need for downsizing and divesting and decluttering. What is one of the things we often do when we're downsizing? We hold a tag sale or a rummage sale. (For individuals, a rummage sale is mostly a way to get rid of stuff and make some money in the process; for churches,

rummage sales are mostly a way to make some needed money by helping to get rid of other people's stuff.) I'm not talking about a physical rummage sale. I'm talking about a spiritual rummage sale.

In the past decade or so, there's been an emergence of theological thinking about the need for this different kind of church rummage sale. As one author writes, "every 500 years, the Church goes through a rummage sale, and cleans out the old forms of spirituality and replaces it with new ones.

"This does *not* mean that previous forms become obsolete or invalid. It simply means they lose *pride of place* as the dominant form of Christianity....What is giving way right now is Protestantism, in the form that we know it, and what is emerging is a new form of Christianity, what [Phyllis Tickle] is calling 'The Great Emergence.'"<sup>2</sup>

We're all witnessing how church, in the form that we know it, is giving way right now. Declining numbers (worship attendance, Sunday school attendance, financial resources). The rise of the "nones"--those who check "none" when asked in surveys about their religious affiliation. The rise of the "dones"--those whose primary connection with church was through their children, and now that their children are college students or young adults, they are "done" with church.

Last Sunday I suggested that one of the challenges facing our two congregations in the years ahead is that scary word evangelism. At its best, evangelism means sharing some important good news: that in Jesus Christ, God was reconciling the world to Godself, and entrusting to Jesus' followers the ongoing ministry of reconciliation.

Last Sunday I also confessed that I don't have much wisdom to offer about how to do evangelism, about how to engage in church revitalization in today's post-Christian world. But what I do know is this: the cornerstone for church revitalization is the quality of the relationship between pastor and people. Which is why the ministry of your settled pastor search committee is going to be foundational for the future of your two congregations. Which is why strengthening the relationship between these two congregations is going to be foundational for the future of your shared ministries.

Today I confess that I don't have much wisdom to offer about how to conduct the 500-year rummage sale here in Higganum and Haddam. But what I do know is this: rummage sale and revitalization will go hand in hand. What I do know is this: the quality of the relationship between you and your next settled pastor will be foundational to the success of these endeavors. What I do know is this: The quality of the relationship between your two congregations will be foundational to the success of these endeavors.

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<sup>2</sup><https://vialogue.wordpress.com/2008/04/27/the-great-emergence-phyllis-tickles-500-year-rummage-sale/>.