

Organizing Our Stuff

Hosea 11:1-11 Colossians 3:1-11 Luke 12:13-21

Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church

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A man has come to Jesus asking for help. "Teacher, I have a problem. My brother has control of the entire family inheritance and he won't give me my share. No matter what I say he won't listen to me. I need someone who has authority to put pressure on him so he will do what is right. Surely, Jesus, you see the injustice in this. Tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

As we have noted before, Jesus often answers questions in a roundabout manner. He does not simply say, "Yes, I see you have been treated unjustly. I'll help you." Nor does he say, "No, I won't help you." He says, "Sir, beware of covetousness... And speaking of covetousness, let me tell you a story." So Jesus tells a story about a rich man whose land brought forth abundantly, so much so that he didn't have enough room to store his harvest.

Now what is going through this petitioner's mind while Jesus is telling the story? "What does this man and his barns have to do with me? I am not like that man. I don't have any barns. That's why I want my inheritance!"

"Jesus, tell the story again about the rich man and Lazarus. You see, my brother is the rich man feasting sumptuously while sitting in my parent's house, and I am outside banging on the door because he won't give me my fair share!"

But no! Jesus tells a story about the foolishness of bigger barns. Jesus' message to this man who wants his share of the inheritance is: "So why are you so worried about your inheritance? Why is it of such importance to you?"

Why indeed is it so important to us? Our possessions are important to us because we do not want to live in poverty; we do not want to spend all our waking hours seeking after the minimum of food and shelter that we need to survive. Ah, but we have pulled ourselves beyond the borders of poverty and still worry about money occupies our thoughts.

Hey, I am that man who needs bigger barns. Now I try to live somewhat frugally. I walk to work half the time. We have put compact florescent bulbs in all our light fixtures. When I go to the ecological earth footprint web site and take the survey, it tells me that it takes 15 acres of arable land to sustain my modest lifestyle, compared to 24 acres for the average American. Which means, further, that if everyone was as frugal as me, we would need 3 1/2 more planet earths to sustain us. I don't just need bigger barns. I need 3 1/2 more planet earths!

And I need bigger landfills to hold all the stuff I throw away. Californians create 46 million tons of trash a year, enough to fill 2 freeway lanes 100 feet deep from Mexico to Oregon.ⁱ Even the decomposable stuff we throw away doesn't decompose when it gets to our landfills. Moisture and oxygen are needed to break down bio-degradable stuff, but stuff buried in landfills is not exposed to air and moisture, so when researchers have dug deep into old landfills, they have found 50 year old newspapers that can still be read, and

ancient hotdogs that still look like hotdogs. New York City has no place nearby to dump all of its stuff, so rural communities in Virginia and Pennsylvania are glad to build bigger landfills in order to make money by storing New York's trash.

As a culture we have taken the main character in Jesus' parable to be our preferred role model. We need more acreage, more landfills, more planets for our stuff, our lifestyle and our refuse!

Jesus said that the man who wanted to build bigger barns was a fool. It seemed perfectly reasonable to him. He had a bigger harvest so he needed bigger storage. But Jesus turns that perspective upside down by questioning the need for the bigger harvest or a greater inheritance. You don't need more stuff. Organize the stuff you have. Prioritize – put your life in order.

New Zealand has adopted as national policy that by the year 2020 they will have zero waste. They will build no more landfills because they will throw nothing away. The same goal has been adopted by the city of San Francisco. Zero waste? Is that possible? Culver City's present goal is to recycle 50% of our waste, but our city's environmental coordinator wants to do better.

Zero waste is possible if we look at our lives with a fresh perspective. A zero waste policy begins from the point of design. When zero waste becomes serious public policy, then products are designed so that everything that goes into them will end up eventually either in the recycle bin or the compost pile. In the natural world of God's creation, nothing goes in a landfill. Creation is a steady-state economy that is constantly being reused and renewed. Zero waste is simply learning to live according to God's design.

Jesus has shown us God's design for spiritually sustainable lives. When we put our lives in order, we are using the product the way God intended. If we really get organized, ordered and prioritized, then we will have zero waste, zero injustice, zero violence and zero poverty. Then we will experience truly abundant lives of peace, love and joy!

For the last couple of weeks I have been focusing on the theme of putting our lives in order. When we put ourselves in order, then our church and our community will be in order, and then our nation and our world will be in order. In the scriptures two weeks ago Mary of Bethany modeled the first priority for us by sitting at the feet of Jesus. She showed us that if Jesus is in your living room, the first priority is to learn from him. We have this opportunity every day when we open the scriptures. Last week Jesus helped us put our lives in order by teaching his disciples how to pray. Today Jesus further instructs us about priorities by telling us that our lives do not consist in the abundance of our possessions. And then Paul tells us what our lives do consist of: New Life in Christ.

When Paul wrote to the Colossians he was concerned about reports that some in the congregation sought to "puff themselves up," emphasize their higher status, to put themselves above the others. Paul said that all the ways in which we seek to put ourselves on top of the heap - evil desire, greed, anger, malice – these are the old ways of the world. Now that you are Christians, he told them, you have put off those old ways and put on the new way of Christ.

Christ has freed us from our struggles to make ourselves important by accumulating more stuff than our neighbor. Our importance hangs on the one fact that we are loved by God. Nothing can give us any more importance than the fact that we are

those for whom Christ died. Therefore, says Paul, there is no distinction to be made between us as to our importance. "Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and in all."

Here in this cup and this loaf we share together this morning - here in this Holy Meal is life's most valuable treasure. It is God's love, freely given. To receive this gift, and then to respond simply, faithfully, lovingly, this is the most important thing. Let us so order our lives. Amen.

ⁱ Sustainable Workbook, p. 91, Community Partners/Sustainable Works, Los Angeles, 2002