

Aug. 1, 2010

Luke 12:13-21

**“Don’t mess with my stuff”**

Last Sunday Pastor Bromleigh joined us for worship, offering the message this one time during her summer of maternity leave following the birth of her second daughter in May.

She shared with us from a book she had been reading about the use of air-conditioning in the United States. She quoted the author, who refers to us as “refrigerated people”, reflecting on the dynamics of this relatively new reality and how it impacts us and the world overall.

Today I am thinking about what kind of people we are here in the U.S. and I would propose we reflect on ourselves as the People of Stuff. We accumulate lots and lots of stuff. I read about our former governor in the Tribune this week, about how he has 7 storage units of stuff in a storage center, where he has neglected to pay rent for about a year. Although I would not suggest that he is a typical US resident, I do think we ALL accumulate lots and lots of stuff. It is not ENTIRELY evil, but it can lead us astray.

We get jobs to earn money to buy more stuff, which in turn requires more work and more bucks to be cared for, maintained, protected, insured. A comedian once commented on our “stuff” preoccupation asking, “What is a house anyway? It’s a pile of stuff with a lid on it!” I can’t fly in an airplane without looking down to see pile after pile of “stuff” stored in little boxes with lids that we call “houses”. Stuff.

What is wrong with this? If it doesn’t hurt anyone else, why not pile and store all we can?

Well, there’s that story, you know, the one that Jesus told about the farmer—that was read for us this morning- from Luke’s gospel.

Please take note: this farmer did not hurt anyone as he acquired his wealth. He was not involved in graft, he did not manipulate the market. He didn’t steal from his neighbors, or mistreat his workers. He just worked the land and it produced bountifully. The rich soil, the sun, the rain—all made him a wealthy man. He made a simple economic decision, and replaced his old barns with new bigger ones.

What on earth could be wrong with this? We often call this the story of the “rich fool”. Why?? This guy seems pretty savvy, prudent--- what makes him a fool?

Jesus’ parable here does not constitute a global condemnation of having “stuff”. This is a parable about “coveting”—not a word we often use—about serving, worshipping, and giving power to “stuff”. It’s about trusting “stuff” to be our salvation.

This farmer lives in and for HIMSELF. Totally. Completely. Coveting is always very self-focused. This gent talks neither to God nor to others. He talks to himself. He congratulates himself. He plans for himself. This caring for one’s SELF as a kind of intense, compulsive priority leads to covetousness—a state of using all one’s power and gifts to acquire and maintain what appears valuable and desirable. Friends, this is an epidemic in our culture. We are ALL, without exception, carrying at least a MILD case of the disease.

We covet because we are afraid, we don’t feel secure. Friends, the world IS a dangerous place. None of us get out of it alive. We have FEARS- about our basic worth, about suffering, about being in want, about harm from many directions, about scorn of others. Our insecurities and fears lead us to HOARD as a guarantee against want, suffering, harm and scorn. Think about all we hoard.

What is the stuff we pile up? We hoard things to provide for our basic, bodily needs: food, clothing, beds, blankets—so we can eat, be warm, sleep, rest. We pile up refrigerators, freezers, wine cooling refrigerators, garage refrigerators, workshop refrigerators, wet bar refrigerators so we can always get a cold drink. We love our stoves, blenders, microwaves, food processors, toasters, pots, pans, dishes, dish towels, pot holders, sponges, lemon-fresh Joy, SOS scouring pads—and on and on and on. All related to meeting basic human bodily needs.

We hoard things to provide for emotional needs: things that provide for entertainment, recreation, learning, rest, diversion. We pile up books, magazines, televisions in every room, computers, electronic game systems, bikes, scooters, skis, golf equipment, tents, campers. Our emotional needs include being accepted, attractive and appealing to others—so we pile up

mouthwash, colognes, exercise equipment, weights and benches, cabinets full of makeup, hair dryers, closets filled with name-brand clothing, nice cars with leather seats.

We hoard things to assure at least basic minimum social standing: decent housing, clothing and vehicles—and we often go as far beyond decent as we can afford with these items.

We not only hoard possessions, but we try to accumulate people and ideas as if they were things we can possess. Our “stuff” can include our friends, spouses, boyfriends, girlfriends, children, employees, subordinates. We store these to protect ourselves against our fears and insecurities regarding our personal worth, social standing, and emotional needs. Our “stuff” can include our ideas, religious and political beliefs, when they are used as protections against the ambiguities of life, OR as a club to put down others while elevating ourselves.

If Jesus’ parable is not simply telling us to go out and get rid of our stuff, what should we do? How do we address this problem, this entangling encumbrance of “stuff”, both tangible and intangible?

The apostle Paul, writing in the letter to Colossians, tells us to “put to death evil desire.....and greed (covetousness), which is idolatry”. When we “covet”—we make “stuff” an idol. ALL our stuff--- possessions, ideas, and people (when we hoard them like THINGS) is without any REAL power to meet our needs, to make us safe and whole, to bring us fulfillment, meaning and joy.

THAT’s why the farmer is a rich fool. He can’t see this, or believe it. We worship stuff as we accumulate it. We worship it to keep us safe and provide life with meaning and joy. Sometimes we look at other societies and cultures with condescension asking, “How can those people believe that their stone statues, or sacred feathers, or holy smoke or whatever-- have any real power in themselves?? Only GOD has power; only GOD is real and worthy of our worship! They are poor, silly, foolish, deluded idol worshippers.” Friends, Jesus told stories for the RELIGIOUS, GOOD FOLKS, who thought they had it all together! Time for us to see our OWN idolatry.

Paul tells us to QUIT this! TO CUT IT OUT! Why? Because God is a hard taskmaster and doesn’t want us to have any fun, or enjoy life? Precisely the

OPPOSITE! God knows we will be caught in the tyranny of hoarding stuff, and it won't bring us joy or fulfillment. It will be like trying to float on a raging river holding onto a lead pipe. Death is the great revealer of this truth. Death comes to the rich fool, and shows us what is real. There is an old proverb: "Ain't no pockets in a shroud". We say, "You can't take it with you." The burden of trying to protect ourselves, to provide for all contingencies—this is a heavy load, a mighty burden. We can't do it.

God comes to us in Christ to set us free. Christ calls us to lay down that burden of our own well-being. "Don't covet," reads one of the Ten Commandments. If you do, you'll be weary, drained dry, burdened beyond belief. God will help us be faithful, to put to death this death-dealing way of life.

We need God's help in assessing to what extent "stuff idolatry" has captured our hearts. Let's ask the Holy Spirit to send us forth today with a readiness for some courageous self-examination. We want to be a faithful people; with God's help we will continue to grow in faith. Amen.