

Mark 17: 10-31

¹⁷ As Jesus continued down the road, a man ran up, knelt before him, and asked, “Good Teacher, what must I do to obtain eternal life?”

¹⁸ Jesus replied, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except the one God. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: Don’t commit murder. Don’t commit adultery. Don’t steal. Don’t give false testimony. Don’t cheat. Honor your father and mother.”[a]

²⁰ “Teacher,” he responded, “I’ve kept all of these things since I was a boy.”

²¹ Jesus looked at him carefully and loved him. He said, “You are lacking one thing. Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me.” ²² But the man was dismayed at this statement and went away saddened, because he had many possessions.

²³ Looking around, Jesus said to his disciples, “It will be very hard for the wealthy to enter God’s kingdom!” ²⁴ His words startled the disciples, so Jesus told them again, “Children, it’s difficult to enter God’s kingdom! ²⁵ It’s easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God’s kingdom.”

²⁶ They were shocked even more and said to each other, “Then who can be saved?”

²⁷ Jesus looked at them carefully and said, “It’s impossible with human beings, but not with God. All things are possible for God.”

²¹ Jesus looked at him carefully and loved him. He said, “You are lacking one thing. Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me.” ²² But the man was dismayed at this statement and went away saddened, because he had many possessions.

“You’ve got to be kidding me, Jesus!! You can’t possibly mean that? How would I possibly survive without my things? I don’t know anyone who has given up everything to follow Jesus. I’m not saying those people don’t exist. They live in monasteries. Or are on rare pilgrimages. They don’t have family to take care of. Come on God, what are you asking of me? Do I HAVE to?”

If we are really honest with ourselves, we have too many things.... lots of stuff... that can distract us from the really important things in life. We might even refer to some of our stuff.... as idols, things we value and even worship.

When it goes to an extreme, one way to look at least some of these idols is to think at least some of them as our addictions.... In twelve step groups, the participants admit to powerlessness over their own personal addiction demons.... alcohol, drugs, money, sex, relationships, certain foods, and there’s even a 12-step group for clutter or stuff.

There is a list of 20 questions that can be found on-line to determine if you just might have a

problem with clutter and all your stuff dominating your life... they say that if you can answer “Yes” to even 7 of these, you might be in need of support for this “Addiction” I could answer “Yes” to more than half of these, but I’m not going to read all of these, only the six that especially jumped out at me.

Assessment for Compulsive Hoarding & Cluttering

1. Are some living areas in your home cluttered? Y/N
2. Do you have trouble controlling urges to acquire things? Y/N
3. Does the clutter in your home prevent you from using some of your living space? Y/N
4. Do you have trouble controlling your urges to save things? Y/N
5. Do you have trouble walking through any areas of your house because of clutter? Y/N
6. Do you have trouble throwing away or discarding things? Y/N
7. Do you experience distress throwing away or discarding possessions? Y/N
8. Do you feel distressed or uncomfortable when you cannot acquire something you want? Y/N
9. Does the clutter in your home interfere with your social, work or everyday functioning? Y/N
10. Do you have strong urges to buy or acquire free things for which you have no immediate use? Y/N
11. Does the clutter in your home causes you distress? Y/N
12. Do you have strong urges to save things you know you may never use? Y/N
13. Do you feel upset/distressed about your acquiring habits? Y/N
14. Do you feel unable to control the clutter in your home? Y/N
15. Has compulsive buying resulted in financial difficulties? Y/N
16. Do you often avoid trying to discard possessions because it is too stressful or time consuming? Y/N
17. Do you often decide to keep things you do not need and have little space for? Y/N
18. Does the clutter in your home prevent you from inviting people to visit? Y/N
19. Do you often buy or acquire for free things for which you have no immediate use or need? Y/N
20. Do you often feel unable to discard a possession or possessions you would like to get rid of? Y/N

(Most hoarders will answer "yes" to at least 7 of these questions.)

This is hard for us to admit, but many of us suffer from affluenza.... we are used to having lots of stuff around us. I know for me, as a newly retired teacher, I have lots of stuff from teaching that I need to purge. Besides, much of this paperwork can be available on line, if I truly find I need it again sometime. I have way too many books. But, it’s hard to let stuff go. Why do we hold on?

Do we let our stuff... whatever it is, get in the way of being able to live fully in the moment. Does our stuff get in the way of our ability to be of service to others?

Jesus’ message this morning is hitting us right where it hurts. We are attached to some of our things. This is at least partly cultural. My own parents grew up during the depression. My dad especially lived a very sparse life during childhood, with parents and five boys in a small house, even sharing beds. He worked hard from a very young age and earned money very proudly so.... with one of the biggest paper routes in San Diego at that time. He was the only one of the five boys to go to college. He has

accomplished a great deal in his life, and he still lives in a very large house which today is mostly full of stuff, things he no longer needs, and certainly way more than he can manage. His upbringing taught him to work hard and hold on to stuff. He can't imagine leaving any of it to move to a smaller, more appropriate space. They continue to live with the clutter all around them. I don't bring my parents up to draw attention to them alone. Many of us could say the same thing about at least one room or part of our house. I know I can.

So how are we to interpret what Jesus is saying? Acts 5: 1-6 indicates that early followers were encouraged to sell their property and donate it to the common good. Our experiences and reading of scripture about Jesus' ministry have encouraged us to be loving and caring, to help and serve others. This scripture from Mark says that we will also earn treasure in heaven by this action. We know from other scriptures that Jesus thought that heaven is right here and right now. We also know that our stuff can sometimes keep us from being able to fully participate in the joys and blessings here and now... in the present.

Maybe the question isn't "Do I HAVE to let go of it all?" After all, Jesus looked at the man carefully, saw his pain and difficulty, and loved him before suggesting he go deeper and give away more. The rich man was asking, "What would you have me do?" Sometimes we need reminders and nudges to think about what is really most important. What gives us and others true quality of life? Just sometimes, there are special things that make all the difference to us and to others. We have all been given some treasures along the way that still remind us of the love and friendship of the giver.

Robert Fulghum has written a sweet story about the really important things in life -

The cardboard box is marked, "The Good Stuff." As I write, I can see the box where it is stored on a high shelf in my studio. I like being able to see it when I look up. The box contains those odds and ends of personal treasures that have survived many bouts of clean-it-out-and-throw-it-away that seize me from time to time. A thief would not take anything - he couldn't get a dime for any of it. But if the house ever catches fire, the box goes with me.

One of the keepsakes in the box is a small paper lunch bag. Though the top is sealed with duct tape, staples, and several paper clips, there is a ragged rip in one side through which the contents can be seen.

This particular sack has been in my care for many years, but it really belongs to my daughter Molly. Soon after she became school aged, she started helping with packing the morning lunches. One morning she handed me two bags. One regular lunch sack. And this one with the duct tape and staples and paper clips. "Why two bags?" The other one is something else." "What's in it?" "Just some stuff - take it with you." So I put both sacks in my briefcase, kissed her, and rushed off.

At lunch time, while scarfing down my real lunch, I tore open Molly's bag and shook out the contents. Two hair ribbons, three small stones, a plastic dinosaur, a pencil stub, a tiny seashell, two animal crackers, a marble, a used lipstick, a small doll, two chocolate kisses, and thirteen pennies.

I smiled. How charming. Rising to hurry back to all the important business of the afternoon, I swept the desk clean - into the wastebasket - leftover lunch, Molly's junk, and all. There wasn't anything in there I needed.

That evening Molly came to stand beside me and asked, "Where's my bag?" "What bag?" "You know, the one I gave you this morning." "I left it at the office, why?" "I forgot to put this note in it." She hands over the note. "Besides, I want it back." "Why?" "Those are my things in the sack. Daddy, the ones I really like - I thought you might like to play with them, but now I want them back. You didn't lose the bag, did you, Daddy?" Tears puddled in her eyes. "Oh no, I just forgot to bring it home." I lied. "Bring it tomorrow, okay?" "Sure thing - don't worry." As she hugged my neck with relief, I unfolded the note that had not gotten into the sack: "I love you, Daddy."

Oh... and also oh-oh. I looked long at the face of my child. She was right - what was in that sack was "something else." Molly had given me her treasures. Love in a paper sack. I had missed it. Not only missed it, but thrown it in the wastebasket because "there wasn't anything in there I needed." Dear God!! This wasn't the first time I felt my Daddy Permit was about to run out.

It was a long trip back to the office. The pilgrimage of a penitent. Just ahead of the janitor. I picked up the wastebasket and poured the contents on my desk. I was sorting it all when the janitor came in. "Lose something?" "Yeah, my mind." "It's probably in there, all right. What's it look like and I'll help you find it." I started to not tell him. But I couldn't feel any more of a fool than I already felt, so I told him. He didn't laugh. He smiled. "I got kids, too." So the brotherhood of fools searched the trash and found the jewels and he smiled at me and I smiled at him. You are never alone in these things. Never.

After washing the mustard off the dinosaurs and spraying the whole things with breath freshener to kill the smell of onions, I carefully smoothed out the wadded ball of brown paper into a semi-functional bag and put the treasures inside and carried the whole thing home gingerly. The next evening I returned it to Molly, no questions asked. The bag didn't look so good, but the stuff was all there and that's what mattered. After dinner I asked her to tell me about the stuff in the sack, and so she took it all out a piece at a time and placed the objects in a row.

It took a long time to tell. Everything had a story, a memory, or was attached to dreams and imaginary friends. Fairies had brought some things. And I had given her the chocolate kisses, and she had kept them for when she needed them. I managed to say "I see" several times. And as a matter of fact, I did see.

To my surprise, Molly gave the bag to me once again several days later. Same ratty bag. Same stuff inside. I felt trusted. And loved. And a little more comfortable wearing the title of Father. Over several months the bag went with me from time to time. I was never clear to me why I did or did not get it on a given day. I began to think it was a Daddy Prize and tried to be good the night before.

In time, Molly turned her attention to other things and found other treasures and lost interest in the game and grew up. Me” I was left holding the bag. She gave it to me one morning and never asked for its return.... So the worn paper sack is there in the box. Left over from a time when a child said, “Here - this is the best I’ve got. Take it - it’s yours.”

What are those things that are really precious and important to us? What are the things that help us keep our priorities straight? Yes, we do need to let go of those things that keep us from connecting with the Holy, with serving and loving others... in our heaven that is here and now. We also need to remember what is truly most important, and of course, often this is about relationships.

We are generous folk here and now. We give from our hearts with our resources of time and talents and money. During this stewardship season, we are exploring what it means to be servants - to follow God’s call. Knowing how and when to serve.... is not always easy. We will always have opportunities to choose, often too many choices.... Opportunities to think wisely about what is really important. What will feed and nourish our own soul? And how can we give back just some of the love and resources we have been given so that others might also share in God’s heaven right here and right now.

21 Jesus looked at him carefully and loved him. He said, “You are lacking one thing. Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me.”

What must we do to answer the call?