

October 11, 2009
Lectionary 28b
Mark 10:17-31
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

STUFF TO DEAL WITH

The rich man in today's gospel has stuff to deal with. After a stimulating encounter with Jesus, he goes away sad. The simple reason: he has stuff he can't part with.

You have to give him some credit. He has youthful eagerness. Sure, he's a bit of a perfectionist. He believes he has kept the Ten Commandments and now wants eternal life. In other words, to live in the kingdom of God.

Jesus doesn't mince words. He tells the man he must simplify his life, get rid of his stuff, and give it to the poor. You can't be rich and enter the kingdom of God. If your arms are full of stuff--full of self--you don't have any need for God, any room for God.

The man goes away sad. He has stuff --inner and outer--to deal with. He was probably a wealthy landowner, a powerful class of people that often oppressed the poor. His stuff and status made him feel secure. And his religious tradition taught him that being rich was a sign of divine favor. Jesus' words about redistributing his assets are simply shocking, unrealistic, and come on, offensive. Doesn't it make you feel a little sad as well?

Most Americans don't define themselves as rich. Even though we're the richest nation in the history of humankind. It would be nice to think that this text is about someone else. That it's other people who have stuff to deal with. But that's going to make it even harder for us to go through the eye of a needle!

No wonder there's a cable TV show called *Hoarders*. It's about "packrats in peril." Strange how we can be voyeurs, watching people whose lives are so out of control with stashes of junk and piles of stuff that they need an intervention. Someone has to come in and save them from stuff they can't part with and homes that have literally become disaster zones. Maybe at some level we all realize we are hoarders. We have closets full of clothes we never wear. Basements full of junk we'll never use. Boxes full of we don't-even-know-what and stacks of papers, mail, bills, catalogs. And that's not even mentioning our crammed calendars and our overflowing e-mailboxes.

You wonder what we're doing with all this stuff. Some of you have had to deal with an older person needing to downsize and the overwhelming challenge of going through decades and decades of stuff. And some of you may have had to cart it out of someone's house after they died. As one writer said, "We spend so much of life accumulating and tending our stuff and then, old age comes and turns it into a hassle." (Ann Basye) As Wadsworth said in a sonnet, "Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers."

At Holy Trinity we are reflecting this autumn on the call to live simply. To learn, little by little, how to practice simplicity, gratitude and generosity. To support one another on this challenging and exciting journey. About a month from now we as a community will make renewed commitments about caring for the earth and our bodies, and being more generous with our money and resources.

Maybe we begin by admitting that we have a problem. That we have stuff to deal with. And like the man in the gospel today, the whole thing feels so overwhelming it makes us sad.

One writer (MP Dunleavy) on the MSN money website blames our obsession with stuff on Pottery Barn catalogs and what she calls the affliction of our age: SDA, the Senseless Desire to Acquire. We are allured into buying things we don't need and can't afford. Like one couple that had enough Tupperware for all the leftovers in Connecticut and then donated it to a Smithsonian exhibit on American consumer insanity.

One financial planner (Ilcye Glink) said we simply aren't thinking when we buy and buy and buy: another TV, better speakers, more shoes, another suit, a second car, a new set of dishes, more towels. We buy bigger homes to accommodate all our stuff and then we pay higher taxes, higher heating and cooling bills, a bigger mortgage, and all the costs to care for the stuff.

When one woman was downsizing her overstuffed kitchen and disposing of gadget no. 867, her husband asked her, “is there something wrong with it?” She replied, “Yes, there’s something wrong with it. We didn’t even know we had it.”

Who would have thought stuff would be such a problem. But as comedian Stephen Wright once said, “You can’t have everything. Where would you put it?”

Why do we do this to ourselves? One focus group revealed an answer: because that’s the way our friends and neighbors are living. And spending. And accumulating.

How hard it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. How hard it for us to grow spiritually when we spend our lives managing our stuff and our resources. Trying to mask the insecurity underneath. And the reality that we are mortal. And that life doesn’t last forever.

Jesus looked with love on the rich man. God looks with love and compassion on us. Desiring that we open our hearts to receive a grace that is priceless, that cannot be bought.

We often think that we need to help people in need. That it is the poor who have the problems and we who have the blessings. And yes, it would do us well to part with some of our stuff and our money and redistribute our wealth. Yet maybe we are the ones in need. That by having too much, our lives are out of control. And we are not treasuring the true, simple things of life.

One parent made the point that children can play beautifully with only a few toys yet an overflowing toy box can still lead some kids to claim they have nothing to do. Another woman discovered that when she thought she needed more room for her stuff, she realized what she really needed was less sweaters. She found that she had less trouble deciding what to wear when her choices were limited to the things she really liked. Maybe de-cluttering our closets will help de-clutter our souls. And even to let go of some old grudges and harbored hurts. Maybe it will lead us to share some of our abundance with the poor.

Let’s be honest. We have stuff to deal with. We could leave right now. Go away sad. Overwhelmed by the impossibility of simplifying, de-cluttering, distancing ourselves from stuff.

Or we could come forward to the table with open hands and hearts. Eager to receive the riches of God’s mercy. And the grace that reminds us that with God all things are possible. That we can live simply with things that really matter. That we can be saved from our stuff. That in letting go, there is great freedom.