

TIDY YOUR SOUL

8/4/19 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Proper 13 (C): Hosea 11:1-11; Psalm 107:1-9, 43; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

I'd like to start with a moment of silence for the tragedies of this past week in Gilroy, El Paso, and Dayton. Let us hold in prayer those who mourn the loss of loved ones; those who were victims of the tragedy, the first responders, and for the perpetrators who most definitely need to experience the grace of God in new ways, to unclutter their souls.

[PRAYER-FILLED SILENCE]

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I've said before that when tragedy strikes, our response as Christians, is prayer. First we pray for those affected. And then, we pray for God's guidance about what we might do in our own lives to help end such tragedies. May this sermon help you hear that guidance in your life.

Several years ago, I was at a bookstore with my nieces. The younger one stood with me in front of the self-help section, looking at rows and rows of books on decluttering your life and organizing your home. She pointed at the books and declared: "These books do not work!".

"Really?" I asked. "How do you know?"

"Well," she explained with all the sincerity of any eight-year-old, "my mom keeps buying 'em, but our house is still a mess!"

There are literally thousands of websites, books and consultants-for-hire offering the latest technique to declutter our lives, which points us to the fact that we have too much stuff in our lives! Some of you probably hopped on the Marie-Kondo-wagon this past year, committing to declutter your own home.

It's a pretty simple concept that makes a lot of sense: less clutter equals greater peace of mind. So, as I studied this morning's readings, I couldn't help but think that most of our Christian teachings are also about decluttering. But rather than decluttering one's home, the prophet Hosea, the disciples of Paul, and Jesus explore are persistently pointing to the decluttering of one's soul.

Think about the Gospel we studied a few weeks ago when Jesus said to Martha: "You are distracted by many things." Jesus was freeing Martha from worrying about the guests and the cooking; inviting her, instead, to declutter her soul...to be completely present to what mattered most in that moment, which was listening to Jesus's message of love and the Good News of God.

Decluttering one's soul is another way of describing what Jesus calls "self-emptying". Like our homes, having a bunch of extra stuff in our spiritual house will only add to our dis-ease in life and rob us of a fuller relationship with God.

The prophet Hosea describes the relationship between God and the people of Israel as a loving mother, pining after her rebellious children. God is tempted to give up on them because they are so committed to having things their way...without regard that their personal desires don't equate to what is good and most beneficial to the whole. The image of God as mother desperate to bring her children back into her arms, reminds me of the voice I heard coming from the balcony above my condo recently.

My upstairs neighbors' son, Henry, is only four, but, as you parents know, the kind of rebellion described by the prophet Hosea begins early in life! Whatever it was Henry wanted to do in that moment, he was convinced it was the most important thing in the world to do. His parents had obviously said "no". His voice echoing into the evening air became louder with each shout: "I don't love you guys anymore! You're mean! I hate you!"

In those moments of wanting our way without regard to the rest of the world, our minds—perhaps our souls—are absolutely cluttered with all the emotions, convictions, declarations, and a bunch of societal teachings that our way is better! Our way is best!

Both characters in Luke come off with this same type of mindset. The first is an actual man who interrupts Jesus's teaching to ask about settling an estate with his brother. This man knows the law, but seems to be looking for a loophole that would leave him more profitable in a shorter amount of time.

The second character is a farmer in a parable created by Jesus. This farmer already had enough stuff to provide for him and his family, but was now faced with an abundance of stuff. Rather than sharing with his neighbors, or even finding out what his neighbors might need, he decides to build a bigger barn to store the extra stuff. He also overlooks the signs that his own life is about to end, which means he will never enjoy all that extra stuff he stored.

Both characters are motivated by greed. They're not like Joseph, whose story is told in Genesis of storing up grain for the whole country, knowing there's a famine coming. Conversely, these guys are making decisions and taking actions that are completely self-serving; not to mention the clutter they are accumulating in their soul with greed, the worry of how to accumulate more, how to store more, and how to keep others from taking any of their stuff.

The point Jesus makes is that greed, or whatever else is getting in the way of our self-emptying, is getting in the way of our relationship with God. Jesus's recommendation, much like Marie Kondo's is, "Tidy your space, transform your life," or in the case of our spiritual house, "Tidy your soul, transform your life."

The kingdom of God offers us a sanctuary for our soul—a place of peace and serenity. That's very similar to what Ms. Kondo's website says about her: "Marie is a renowned tidying expert helping people around the world to transform their cluttered homes into spaces of serenity and inspiration."

I wonder...what kinds of stuff clutter your soul? Jesus clearly indicates in teaching after teaching that the two greatest commandments are all we need: "Love God with all your heart and soul," and "Love your neighbor as yourself". Can you imagine if those were the only two concepts that resided in our psyches/our minds/our souls? But without paying much attention, we've all accumulated a bunch of extra stuff in our souls.

There is greed, grudges, sexism, racism, ageism, twisted beliefs about whether we're worthy of God's love or not, outdated theology about who's in and who's out of God's kingdom, worry about security, etc., etc., etc.! And what I know about things like greed and anger, is that they're typically what we call, "cover-up" emotions. Anger often covers up fear. Greed usually covers up an emotional hole; a hole many attempt to fill with stuff.

Most often we're not aware of the cover-up emotion, and even less aware of the underlying emotion. But it all adds to the clutter in our homes as well as in our souls. Let me give you a concrete image of this. My mother dying seven years ago left a huge hole in my father's heart and his life, so he started buying stuff...not out of real greed, but out of the need to fill the hole.

Throughout his house are shopping bags brought home, but never emptied. Light-bulbs, flags to fly in the yard, extra wash cloths, socks, Wrangler jeans, nuts, bolts, a brand of toilet paper he doesn't like, portable heaters...you name it, it all sits in untouched piles. The latest is a lawnmower purchased just in case the one he bought last year breaks-down. That's a lot of clutter—physically and emotionally!

Can you imagine what it would be like to apply the Marie-Kondo-technique to our souls? Her website also states: "People around the world have been drawn to this philosophy not only due to its effectiveness, but also because it places great importance on being mindful, introspective and forward-looking."

My dad is forward-looking in anticipating that his current lawnmower will eventually quit working, but the new lawnmower is not the result of any mindfulness with regard to the space it's taking up in his van. Likewise, the farmer in Luke was forward-looking in the sense that he hoped to be able to sit back, eat, drink and be merry, but was not introspective in the least about how he might share his abundance.

In complete contrast, I read about a set of twin brothers recently. As children, they moved with their family from Mexico to California. Like many people in similar situations, they and their parents made lots of sacrifices to get ahead. This past June both boys graduated from UCLA's medical school. Because they understand deeply that we're not on this journey alone, one of them commented, "Every day I wake up and I think, 'What can I do today to make myself better, my family better, and my community better?'"

That kind of thinking is described in our reading from Colossians as "setting your minds on things that are above". The admonishment to the people of Colossae is that the clutter in their souls have them overly focused on earthly things. The author writes that, alternatively, as they—as we—live our lives in Christ we "must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language...[and]not lie to one another." I heard it said simply in a movie I saw Friday: "Make sure the ones you love know you love them, and tell the truth to everyone as often as possible."

The letter to the Colossians goes on to stipulate that "There is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised...slave and free" because any divisiveness, any sorting of who's in and who's out, is just more soul-clutter. Instead, the message proclaims: "Christ is all and in all!"

That's the simplicity of Jesus's message: "Love God and love your neighbor;" the rest is clutter! "Tidy your soul, transform your life!"

-AMEN

The Collect

Let your continual mercy, O Lord, cleanse and defend your Church; and, because it cannot continue in safety without your help, protect and govern it always by your goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Hosea 11:1-11

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love.

I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes. My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all.

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath. They shall go after the LORD, who roars like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west. They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes, says the LORD.

Psalm 107:1-9, 43

- 1 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, *
and his mercy endures for ever.
- 2 Let all those whom the LORD has redeemed proclaim *
that he redeemed them from the hand of the foe.
- 3 He gathered them out of the lands; *
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.
- 4 Some wandered in desert wastes; *
they found no way to a city where they might dwell.
- 5 They were hungry and thirsty; *
their spirits languished within them.
- 6 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, *
and he delivered them from their distress.

- 7 He put their feet on a straight path *
to go to a city where they might dwell.
- 8 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his mercy *
and the wonders he does for his children.
- 9 For he satisfies the thirsty *
and fills the hungry with good things.
- 43 Whoever is wise will ponder these things, *
and consider well the mercies of the LORD.

Colossians 3:1-11

If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things-- anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

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."