

I have too much stuff. Perhaps some of you can relate. A year after moving into my home, my living room is still littered with so many boxes that I'm embarrassed. It has been pointed out to me that they must contain things that I don't use, and yes, I know about the rummage sale, but all of my stuff is, by definition, stuff that survived the multiple rounds of purges I went through before leaving Gloucester, and the boxes I have unpacked have mostly contained things I do want to keep, and of course, all of that stuff brings back memories. But the thought of going through all of it is overwhelming, so while once in a while I go through another box, most of the time, I go through none of it.

Some of these things were gifts, which occasionally made me think, "I never asked for this!", but most of them were things I bought myself. As such, I justified acquiring most of my stuff at one time, although now I do regret buying some of them. And now, together, they are less than the sum of their parts. The situation is embarrassing, and I remember that the Shakers believed that clutter is a sin. They have a point. Not only does my stuff represent wasted resources, but it silently makes me feel less capable, a lesser servant of God. And suddenly, the idea of the rich man in Jesus' parable, to tear down his barns and build bigger ones, doesn't sound so ridiculous, since for me, the idea of moving from a two-bedroom unit to a three-bedroom, so I could have one room for the stuff, is starting to feel like it could have some merit.

I haven't completely lost it, though. I could believe that having all that stuff was good, and virtuous, and Godly. I could be so deluded as to see it as a source of joy and security. Granted, the rich man in Jesus's parable owns more useful stuff than my bric-a-brac, crops, grain, and goods, but that only makes his delusion stronger. But then I also consider how the richest men in the world today have very publicly brought suffering upon themselves and others, their wealth not remedying, but merely amplifying, their foolishness. And Jesus understands the reason at the very bottom of the rich man's soul, and at the bottom of the soul of the man whose demand for a greater inheritance prompted his telling of the parable, the reason at the bottom of all our souls, that makes us all, foolishly, put our trust in what we can see and touch and control. Fear.

We fear losing control, because we fear what would happen if somebody else had control over us, and we fear the ultimate loss of control: death. So we find that controlling our environment, especially things and people, makes us feel better, superficially. More deeply, though, we know that the things we do to maintain control can ultimately control us, like how my unpacked boxes silently taunt me. If billionaires can't control their private lives, let alone countries, what hope is there for the rest of us? We also know deep down that no amount of wealth or control will really prevent us from one day facing our mortality.

Jesus knew this only too well, and he is our hope. His whole mission was to confront folly, misunderstanding, suffering, and death in a way we never could,

ultimately to accomplish the triumph over death that humanity has always desired but never could achieve. Before that moment, though, Jesus's intimate understanding of our weaknesses means he responds with compassion and reassurance, not judgment and condemnation. This parable doesn't sound like that, but Jesus's very next teaching expands upon it. The verses that immediately follow the parable we just heard, shockingly, are never read in our plan of Sunday readings, so I will read them to you now. Jesus said,

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

What a shame that the designers of our lectionary thought we don't need to hear those words! Especially after such a disturbing parable. At least we hear the parallel in Matthew's Gospel. In our materialism, and our general search for anything but God that will give us love, hope, and security, we can't hear these teachings enough. We need often to be reminded that God's love for us, despite our flaws, despite our sins, despite our persistent foolishness, God's love always comes through for us. God's love is our hope and our security. It's true that we can't control God's love, but that too works to our advantage, because even with all our greed and self-absorption, we still wouldn't treat ourselves as well as God treats us.

Relationship with God is the only response to our deepest fears that actually works. And our relationship with God causes a miracle to happen: when we really, truly believe that God will take care of us, we start to become like God: we become generous with our time, money, and affection—and joy drives out our fear. Our joy can even drive out fear in others.

This is a monumental transformation, not like flipping a switch, but something we accomplish gradually, in fits and starts, with occasional mistakes, for we are still human. But we persist because Jesus has taught us well, made it easier for us to trust God. We believe Jesus when he tells us that God's way of generosity and grace is a better way through life than chasing after wealth and power. Living God's way isn't a means to an

end, that is, a requirement for getting into heaven. Jesus died and rose again for sinners, for fools, for the unworthy, that is, for all of us. But rather, living God's way is an end in itself. The benefits of joy, peace, and satisfaction come to us right now, on Earth as it is in heaven. God's grace is a gift freely given, the only stuff that will give us enduring joy, the only box we truly need to open.