

"Possessions"

Acts 2:42-47

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Douglas M. Donley

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University Baptist Church

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I love to go antiquing. Back when it was relatively safe to go into stores, and I was walking down the streets of Stillwater, I found myself drawn in to the several quirky shops that line downtown. I like browsing the musty shelves, looking for I don't know what. It's not that I want to buy anything. I just love looking at what is there. It's like a step back in time to a different era. I'm getting a snapshot into another's life. I'm flooded with memories. I see things that I remember from my childhood, now long discarded. I find some things that we have in our own home and I wonder if they have value. An old Russel Wright plate or some vintage fiesta ware. If we sold some of our treasures, what might they be worth? I don't have the same experience at a thrift store, although there are deals to be found there. I generally don't need more stuff. In fact there is a rule in our house, not to bring more stuff in. We're running out of room.

I miss the social commentary of George Carlin. He had a great routine several years ago. Part of it went like this:

*I need a place to put my stuff.*

*that's the whole meaning of life, isn't it?*

*Trying to find a place for your stuff.*

*That's all your house is. Your house is just a place for your stuff.*

*If you didn't have so much stuff, you wouldn't need a house.*

*You could just walk around all the time.*

*That's all your house is, it's a pile of stuff with a cover on it.*

*You see that when you take off in an airplane and you look down and you see everybody's got a little pile of stuff.*

*And when you leave your house, you gotta lock it up.*

*Wouldn't want somebody to come by and take some of your stuff.*

*They always take the good stuff.*

*They don't bother with that junk you're saving.*

*Ain't nobody interested in your fourth grade arithmetic papers.*

*They're looking for the good stuff.*

*That's all your house is, it's a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get more stuff.*

*Now, sometimes, sometimes you gotta move you gotta get a bigger house.*

*Why? Too much stuff.*

*You've gotta move all your stuff and maybe put some of your stuff in storage.*

*Imagine that, there's a whole industry based on keeping an eye on your stuff.*

Some of us don't realize how much stuff we have until it comes time for downsizing. But no one wants our old stuff. They want new stuff.

We are told by the advertising industry that our lives will be fulfilled if we continue to consume—their product. And we measure each other by the stuff they have.

This has been a year to contemplate possessions. We've had a year to be at home surrounded by our stuff. We have done the inventory about what brings you joy. We have purged only to find that Goodwill was closed. So we kept our stuff. Garage sales where we exchange our stuff with our neighbors' stuff—dormant, too. At least there is delivery. But what happens when you are not there for the delivery? Someone else takes your stuff.

We have a growing corner of the garage with furniture and things that we have been saving for our kids when they move out on their own. Guess what, they moved out and instead of taking the stuff we thought they wanted, they added to the stash in the garage. It turns out, no one wants our stuff.

Where's the line between being a collector, investor, and a hoarder? Many of us have done our spring cleaning over the past year. What is of value? What represents value to us?

Is the value of the stored furniture, the investment, the monetary value, or is it the sentimental value, the memories attached to the items. And what do you do if your children don't share your same values? Are you a failure? Or are you someone who raised kids to think for themselves and make their own decisions?

All of this is precursor to looking at today's scripture passage. The Sojourners community has mapped the scriptures and has found 2300 scriptures dealing with wealth and possessions. It's a central topic. Jesus spent 11 of his 39 parables talking about money. It made up 15% of his preaching. To illustrate this Jim Wallis used to take a Bible and suggest that if we cut out all of the passages pertaining to wealth, we would end up with a shredded book. Walter Brueggemann famously said, "The church has willingly engaged in a misreading of the Biblical text in order to avoid the centrality of money and possessions in its testimony." Instead, popular Christianity focuses on six passages that supposedly point to homosexuality. Whereas the clear and consistent message of scripture is about wealth, possessions and their corrupting influence.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, Jesus says,

*"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also..." "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."*

Do we spend as much time and energy concerned about an inequitable world as we do protecting our stuff?

Rabbi Michael Lerner in his book *The Politics of Meaning* said that the marketplace mentality of today's world produces alienation. When this happens, people pull together into communities in order to find a foothold in the world. The problem is if the community falls apart or fails them or becomes repressive, they retreat to the known—the marketplace. Rabbi Lerner advocates that we should see our communities as a starting point and not the marketplace. Our communities ought to model how things ought to be: that the meaning we give to our communities, our values of mutuality and respect need to take precedence. We should commit ourselves to the life together in such a way that others might have life and have it abundantly.

How did the early church manifest that life together? Today's scripture says that the early church was communal in nature. They held all of their worldly goods in common, because their goods didn't come from anywhere but God. They made sure that everyone was treated fairly and

equally. They were people who did not want to let things like wealth and worldly power get in the way of their life together. Their churches grew numerically and spiritually as they spent time together in the temple but also at each other's homes breaking bread and gaining sustenance for their journeys. I bet they did their share of eating, sharing, listening, dreaming, praying, confessing, arguing, persuading, encouraging, and responding as they grew closer and closer together. The scripture says that as a result of this their hearts were glad and generous. The scripture also makes a clear connection with this kind of community and salvation. In this context, salvation is part and parcel with being part of this transformative community. For what is the church if it does not bring a kind of salvation for this sin-sick world.

One of the things we have missed this past year is the community. We can hear a sermon on a computer, but the physical presence of loved ones, of community, of lifting our voices together in song is just not the same on line.

This scripture reading about the community gathering is something for which we long. And one of the fruits of being a transformative community was the communal stewardship of wealth and possessions. It was about taking care of each other and not granting favoritism to the wealthier among them. It didn't last long as a practice, but it is the heart of the Biblical ideal. It doesn't go so far as to suggest that distribution of wealth ought to be implemented by government, but it does imply that the early church thought that taking care of the needy was not just a matter of compassion, but also a requirement of healthy community.

Of course this sermon also comes at tax time, when we are trying to figure out what to do with our stimulus checks as we try to predict the future. We have learned in this year that the future will throw us a curve. We're hoping to flatten such curves and make our world more equitable. I heard our local state senator say that we have a K-shaped economy. In this pandemic, people at the top did very well. They stopped commuting. They worked from home. They got their stimulus checks that they didn't really need. The people on the bottom did poorly. They lost their gigs, had to figure out how to do child care and school and work all at the same time.

Several of us have been a part of the mapping racism process—uncovering racial covenants embedded in property deeds. These were designed to keep only white people in certain parts of the city thereby ensuring a homogeneity of neighborhoods and also funneling wealth to the white neighborhoods and away from the black neighborhoods. Plenty of redlining happened against not only black, but also Asian and indigenous people. We think that we are not racists, but we benefit from a system that has given more generational wealth to whites than other people. The very land on which our great church building resides was stolen from the Dakota people through broken treaties of generations ago. We continue to reflect on this history. It informs how we use our wealth—to make this corner a place of healing instead of continued brokenness.

And we wonder what the early church would do.

My friends, life is not about accumulating possessions.

It's about finding purpose in helping others.

It's about leveraging the wealth we might have to call into question systems of inequity.

It's about recognizing your neighbor as your long-lost kin.

It's about remembering that people value the most and making them a priority.

It's about being a community that models compassion, justice, peace, and mercy.

That is our life together.

All of this starts by holding things in common. Using our resources for the common

good and therefore modeling a new and different kind of community.

We have tremendous resources at this church and I have been amazed at what we have done in the over 171 years of our existence.

What do we possess that's more important than property?

Imagination.

Prophetic courage.

Resilience.

Creativity.

The scripture says, "everyone around them was in awe—all those wonders and signs done through the apostles! And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person's need was met."

May we celebrate not only the possessions we have, but the possessions we share. That's what it's really about.

Amen.