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Text: John 12:20-33

### *Letting Go*

Ah, spring is almost here. Keeping up with the events in my personal life, here at church, and around the country has been like trying to drink out of a firehose. So much is happening; my days feel so full that the weeks fly by. It is hard for me to wrap my mind around yet another season almost passed. So much has happened, and there is so much to do.

When spring finally comes, I make time for a tradition that I love to hate: spring cleaning. Every spring Elizabeth and I give our one-bedroom apartment a good scrub down. We clean behind the kitchen appliances and scrub scuffmarks of the walls. We go through our closets and drawers to get rid of old clothes, mementoes, and unneeded paperwork.

I wouldn't call myself a hoarder, but I do have packrat tendencies. In a drawer under our television I keep a gallon bag of old pens and pencils to use in case the cup full of them on my desk runs out. In a large tub in my closet, I keep old costumes, event t-shirts, and jerseys from my favorite athletes as a kid. I save documents in piles on my bookshelf until I am confident I no longer need them.

The minimalist style that has come into vogue over the last few years has been a real blessing to me. While I make sure to go through my stuff several times throughout the year, the big hoe out is always in the spring. With misty eyes, I cull my mental notes to remember if I ever did wear that expensive shirt that never quite fit well or if I need to keep that essay from college. I have such attachment to things that the experience of bagging up my stuff for Goodwill and the dumpster tends to be both melancholy and cathartic at the same time.

My older brother and his wife are minimalist pros. Although they are only in their early thirties, they have embraced the recent craze made famous in Margareta Magnusson's book, *The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning*. Magnusson describes *döstädning*, Swedish for death cleaning, as a "term that means that you remove unnecessary things and make your home nice and orderly when you think time is coming close for you to leave the planet." My brother has embraced a decluttered lifestyle in order to be more organized and less burdened by stuff. Like Magnusson, he also appreciates the open aesthetic and passing on his possessions to others who might get more use out of them.

In today's passage, Jesus in a Swedish death cleaning-esque moment prepares the crowd for his death. Nevertheless, I'm not convinced his primary goal was to make his "home nice and orderly." Jesus' relationship to material things is complicated in the Gospel of John. On the one hand, Jesus has an intimate relationship to the material world. In the prologue, all of creation comes into being through Christ and the incarnation itself flows from God's love for the created. During Jesus' ministry, he had an appreciation for fine things. For his first miracle, he turns water into wine. He later praises the woman who pours the costly perfume at his feet. He

famously declares that he has come so that his followers “may have life, and have it abundantly.” John’s Jesus loves our world of things and routinely encourages us to enjoy them.

Lest we are too quick to embrace unbridled materialism, John also presents us with another part of Jesus. Immediately after the wedding at Cana, Jesus overturns tables and chases the moneychangers and animals from the temple with a whip. In today’s reading, Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” Here Jesus implores us to let go. Just as we can find abundance in letting go of stuff, there is abundance in relinquishing one’s life for a new one centered in Christ. Knowing the intimate connection in John between the material and spiritual, this means relinquishing at least some of our stuff.

Do we Americans today have a problematic relationship with our stuff? Tell me if this quotation rings true:

“In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we’ve discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We’ve learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.”

On point? Although Jimmy Carter delivered these words in a speech in 1979, they still resound deeply today. In the industrialized West, there are more riches and things to own than ever before. Still, there are people who go hungry. Still, there are people with beautiful homes filled with splendid things who live malnourished lives.

If we trust in the words of Jesus, those of us whom God blesses with more than we need would benefit from some letting go. While it is tempting to embrace the minimalist craze to penny pinch for granite countertops and fancy vacations, overturning your life for simply another form of materialistic consumption seems to miss the point. Perhaps we could all benefit from approaching the issue as Jesus does in today’s passage and examining things from a narrower point of view. Most of us need not wantonly throw all our possessions in the dumpster. Most of us would benefit from looking at each of our possessions as an individual seed. In the midst of spring-cleaning, I try to ask myself, if I let go of this possession, will it bear more fruit in someone else’s life? Will my life bear more fruit no longer having to care for it?

Of course, letting go is not easy. It requires confronting the brokenness inside of us. It is a direct affront to the destructive System of materialistic consumption that is woven into the DNA of our society. This System that produces massive amounts of wealth also encourages unsafe sweatshops, irresponsibly depletes our natural resources, and commodifies prisoners. The very things that we believe will make our lives easier, safer, or more comfortable, exact a high toll from us as they fill our closets and jeopardize the lives of the most vulnerable. As you begin to clean and let go, the System will push back.

In today's passage, Jesus' death cleaning includes an explanation of his looming showdown with the System. On the cross, Jesus lets go of his interest in the System of his day, and the System demands blood for his resistance. He explains to the gathered crowd, "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out." The word used for the "world" in Greek is *kosmos* which in this case scholars interpret as the institutionalized brokenness of humanity, i.e. the System.<sup>1</sup> Jesus' death on the cross and his subsequent resurrection, overcome the System by refusing to fight on its term. Through Christ's letting go of his own life, God's redemptive love takes root in the heart of the System. Whereas before we were helpless in light of the System's power, now we have in Christ something strong to hold onto as we seek to clean up our own place in the world.

Just as anyone who has done such work in the past knows, major spring cleaning is a task that works best with the support of others. Jesus says, "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Creator will honor." Jesus promises to never leave us alone as we work to clean up the mess of the System, for wherever the work is done, he is also.

By this very fact, the work of cleaning itself holds such great potential for joy. This is why there is such power in decluttering crazes such as Swedish death cleaning. It helps us know we are not alone as we seek to confront the System. Together we can reclaim the sacredness of our things rather than just letting them pile up in closets. We come to recognize the connection between our overstuffed shelves and our frantic schedules. Since the beginning of time, the link between the material and spiritual things has always been present. The system compels us to disorganize our priorities, and the relationship between the material and the spiritual becomes a mess. As we dive into spring cleaning, we can rediscover the great fruit whose origin is in the seed of our letting go.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles L. Campbell, "John 12:20-33, Homiletical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word*, by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 141-145.