

Sunday, July 7, 2019
Rev. Jessica Paulsen
FPC, Corning
Luke 12:13-21
Matthew 6:19-21

What Belongs to Us?

We're going to begin today with a video—for that's what this sermon is based around and how it was requested. The video can be found here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOFzbgSqH6M>

I watched this video multiple times as I worked out what Scripture passages I wanted to tie it with and theme I wanted to base it around. I kept coming back to this idea of belonging—and not necessarily how we belong, but more the idea of our belongings, our possessions, the question: what belongs to us?

For we can often end up pretty attached to our belongings, can't we? We have our favorite things, those items we don't want to part with, or things that have come to us through generations of our family—Mama's china, or land, or wealth, or books, and so on and so forth. We ask ourselves questions, we ask each other questions, to help ourselves identify what we prioritize—questions such as: if you were to end up stranded on an island, what 3 things would you want to have with you? Or even more to the point—if your home was on fire and you needed to get out, what would you take with you?

People have many different answers to those questions—photographs, blankets, items that have been gifted to them by family members and so on and so forth. Yet, you know what the correct answer is to the question what would you take with you if you were evacuating your burning house? Nothing. That's right, nothing. You don't pause to try and find that one photo album at the back of the shelf, you leave the burning building.

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Another example—this is true when you’re traveling as well, especially if you’re flying. The crew tells all the passengers, right in the middle of their safety demonstration, if they end up having to evacuate the aircraft, leave all of your belongings behind. And yet, what is something many people do first when they’re told to evacuate a plane—grab one of their bags or their belongings. In this instance, not only would you be endangering your own life in trying to save something you believe to be important, you’re putting everyone else’s lives at risk as well.

So, as you can see, we can get pretty attached to our belongings—to the point that we’ll risk our life and sometimes even the lives of others, so that we might keep what belongs to us.

Yet, when we see a video like the one we watched at the beginning, when we hear Jesus speak in the gospels about treasures on earth and treasures in heaven, we are reminded that what we have doesn’t really belong to us. We’ve been given things that can at times make our lives in this broken world easier but that doesn’t mean they belong to us.

As Presbyterians, part of our constitution, *The Book of Order*, makes this very clear. G-4.0201 reads, “The property of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), of its councils and entities, and of its congregations, is a tool for the accomplishment of the mission of Jesus Christ in the world” (2017-2019 edition, pg. 61). Our belongings, our property, are tools that we use to live out our lives following God. *The Book of Order* makes this even more clear in G-4.0203 when it explains that “all property held by or for a congregation, a presbytery, a synod, the General Assembly, or the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), whether legal title is lodged in a corporation, a trustee or trustees, or an unincorporated association, and whether the property is used in programs of a congregation or of a higher council or retained for the production of income, is held in trust nevertheless for the use and benefit of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (Ibid., 62).

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Some cynical people say, well that's just so the church can have everything it wants, which is not the reason for these portions of our constitution. These words, these ideas, that we hold our belongings in trust for the larger communal church, is a reflection of our belief and understanding that what we've been given is a gift from God and as such it is to be used to further God's work here on earth. Not for our own gain, but for the benefit of all that God is doing in and through the communal church. It doesn't belong to us.

That can be a hard place to get to for our world, our society, teaches us that all that we have is ours alone. We're taught to protect, even to death, those things that we believe belong to us. And yet Jesus says very clearly in the gospel of Luke, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (12:15, NRSV). Life is not supposed to be about how much we have or own; or about how much power and esteem our possessions (especially monetary ones) might get us. Life is about living out God's will here on earth. Life is about being God's hands and feet, the body of Christ in the world. Life is about living according to what God treasures, peace, love, grace, and not about living according to what the world treasures, power, money, popularity, and so on.

This is what we proclaim when we come to this table; when we present ourselves for this sacrament. We come together, united as the body of Christ, offering our lives as a living sacrifice to God. We come together and remember the gift that God has given to each of us and in return we offer ourselves and our lives to God. This is what we believe and what we proclaim.

Which means we need to let go of the idea, of the worldly understanding that things belong to us—that we're free to choose what we do with the gifts we've been given. Because the truth of the matter is that it all belongs to God and the gifts we've been given are to be used for God's purposes, not our own.

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