

SERMON

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

460 East Main Street

Lexington, Kentucky 40507

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Salvation, Service & Stuff

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Luke 1:46b—55

“A house is just a pile of stuff.” That’s what the late comedian George Carlin said in his classic routine.

“You can see that when you’re taking off in an airplane,” he explains. “You look down; you see everybody’s got a little pile of stuff. All the little piles 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.”

Especially the shiny stuff.

“That’s what your house is,” he concludes, “a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get ... more stuff!”

We all have stuff — in closets, on bookshelves, in cabinets, in garages, on counters, in cupboards, in attics and in basements. Carlin is right: Our houses are just piles of stuff, with covers on them. And when we fill up our houses, we go out and rent storage lockers. For more stuff. At this point for Leslie and me, our stuff is all in boxes.

The holiday season is a spiritual time but also a celebration of stuff. It starts the day after Thanksgiving, when more than 100 million Americans participate in the shopping rush called Black Friday. It accelerates through Advent, as people max out their credit cards buying presents for family members and friends. It reaches a crescendo on Christmas Eve, as people check off the last items on their shopping lists. Then it continues the next week as people snatch up even more stuff at after-Christmas sales. Retailers depend on the holiday season for their financial health because this quarter of the year produces most of — or all — their profits.

Christmas is an important chapter in the story of stuff.

This seems odd, given that the people closest to Jesus had little interest in material things. In her song of praise in the first chapter of Luke, Mary sings, “Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name” (vv. 48-49).

Mary isn’t saying she’s blessed because she has a nice house filled with valuable stuff. She isn’t talking about the blessings of life in America, which tend to include prosperity, security, education, good health. No, she says she’s blessed because God — the Mighty One — has scattered the proud, brought down the powerful, lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry and sent the rich away empty (vv. 51-53).

The good stuff that God gives isn’t really stuff.

We need to pay attention to this passage because we know the gifts we receive at Christmas don’t provide us with lasting happiness. Sure, its fun to give and receive presents, but where does most of that stuff end up? In closets, bookshelves, cabinets, garages, counters, cupboards, attics and basements. “We are in a stuff crisis,” writes DeNeen Brown in the

Washington Post (March 27, 2010). “We are either consuming it, acquiring it, complaining about it, cleaning it, moving it from store to car to house to garage to a Pod parked in the driveway. We are worried about it. Bored about it. Happy about it. Our stuff has become our baggage.”

And who needs more baggage?

When you say a person has “a lot of baggage,” you aren’t offering a compliment.

In his book *The Man in the Mirror*, Patrick Morley writes: “*To people of our culture, the word consumption means purchasing and using goods and services. To the typical person in the 19th century, the word meant something very different. To most people of that century, consumption was a wasting disease, the disease we know as tuberculosis.*

Before the advent of antibiotics, tuberculosis could be slowed but rarely cured. The long-term effect of the disease was to slowly devour — to consume — all the victim’s health and vigor.

In our culture, we blithely assume that consumption — the economic kind — is always a good thing. It’s good for the merchants (who earn a living), good for the customers (who acquire products they desire) and good for the economy (whose engine it is). Isn’t it?

Ask a person mired in high-interest credit card debt if consumption is lacking a downside. For such a person, the 19th-century understanding of the term may be more true-to-life.”

The time has come for us to write a new chapter in the story of stuff.

Let’s begin with Mary, who starts her song with the words “my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” She zeroes in on salvation, thanking God for saving her from a life of insignificance, meaninglessness and despair. She knows that stuff cannot save her, nor can earthly power or material riches. Only God can save; God alone is Mary’s Savior.

It’s easy to lose sight of this. We feel insignificant, so we go out and buy ourselves something that makes us feel special — a piece of jewelry, a new outfit, a sports car. We worry that our life is meaningless, so we work hard to acquire power and prestige. We find ourselves slipping into despair, so we desperately hold on to what we have, hoping that our possessions and positions will lift our spirits.

But Mary knows the truth: “The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name” (v. 49). God alone can give our lives significance, meaning and hope ... if we open our hearts to the truly precious stuff that God is offering us. For Mary, it’s the gift of a child. For us, it might be forgiveness and the lifting of shame and guilt, unconditional acceptance in the Christian community, a place to express ourselves in music or the visual arts, an opportunity for service in the world around us, the chance to make a real difference in a child’s life. God works through all these gifts to save us — save us from lives of insignificance, meaninglessness and despair.

This new chapter in the story of stuff continues with Jesus, who spent his life forgiving sinners, healing the sick, driving out demons, eating with outcasts and building a community of love and grace. New Testament scholar Alan Culpepper says that “the joy of the mother will be the job of the son,” and he is absolutely right. Everything Mary includes in her joyful song becomes a line in the job description of Jesus the Messiah. Jesus launches his ministry by announcing that the Spirit of the Lord has anointed him “to bring good news to the poor” (4:18), and he goes on to warn people about the danger of riches: “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (12:15).

In the parable of the rich fool, Jesus makes crystal clear that destruction will come to those “who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God” (12:21). In all his teachings, Jesus echoes the song of his mother, Mary, who says that God’s “mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ... He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (1:50, 53).

When we are rich toward God, we're filled with good things. But when our wealth is concentrated in banks and brokerage firms, we find ourselves empty. This is the message of the story of stuff, revised and expanded by Jesus the Christ.

So, how can we insert ourselves into this story? Through a focus on service. Back in 1999, a Methodist minister named Mike Slaughter was flipping through his local paper when an ad for a BMW sedan caught his eye. Then his eye wandered across the page to a story about a famine in Sudan. He turned the words over in his head: "sedan, Sudan." He was irritated with himself that he knew a lot about sedans but almost nothing about the famine in Sudan.

That Christmas, Slaughter announced an offering organized around the theme "Christmas is Jesus' birthday, not yours." He urged church members to give to Sudan an amount equal to what they spent on themselves for Christmas. The challenge was to turn away from consumer culture and spend money in ways that helped bring God's kingdom to people here on earth. Some members split their holiday budgets in half, spending half on themselves and half on Sudan.

According to *Faith & Leadership* (May 25, 2010), the initial offering drew \$317,000. The next year, the congregation raised more than \$500,000. To date, Ginghamburg United Methodist Church in Tipp City, Ohio, has raised over \$6 million for the Sudan Project. In the midst of this, the church's local mission work has continued to thrive. Church members are simply trying to be the hands and feet of Jesus — serving the poor, relieving suffering, planting seeds of hope.

Faith is the willingness to receive whatever God wants to give, or the willingness not to have what God does not want to give. From the greatest of all gifts (salvation in Christ) to the material blessings of any ordinary day (hot water, a pair of legs that work, a cup of coffee, a job to do and the strength to do it), every good gift comes down from the Father of Lights. Every one of them is to be received gladly and with thanks. Sometimes we want things we were not meant to have. Because God loves us, the Father says no. Faith is willing not to have what God is not willing to give. Furthermore, faith does not insist on an explanation. It is enough to know God's promise that God will give what is good; God knows so much more about that than we do.

The key is for the church to really take seriously the call of Christ. If it's not good news to the poor, it's not the gospel. If it's not good news to the poor, it's not the good stuff of God.

Sources:

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The message is from sermons that I preached over the years that I have been in the pastorate. I have compiled them from the notes I made before they were preached. I do not know where I found some of the material contained here. I may have borrowed it, as a whole or in part, from others. I simply do not remember. If this is the case, I apologize right now, and that our combined efforts will glorify God.