

“Soul Searching”

How many of you have read Marie Kondo’s book *The Life-changing Magic of Tidying Up* or watched one of her television shows? During the pandemic I decided I would give her method a try. The aspect I found most helpful was her way of folding clothes. It has made my dresser drawers neater. Instead of my drawers being a jumble I can find my clothes easily. However, her method of decluttering has not been so easy to master. The idea of going through all of my clothes and deciding which ones to keep and which ones to give away felt hard. If it is a shirt or a pair of pants that I liked enough to purchase, I am not likely to want to get rid of it even if I do not wear it much. I still like it. Perhaps being the child of Depression-era parents, I feel I need to hang onto a piece of clothing should I need it again. At some point it makes sense to pass along something because it no longer fits, or it is embarrassingly out of style. I should not be wearing the neon-colored shirts, wide ties, and bellbottoms that I wore in the 70s even if they still fit, which they do not.

Most people I know have more of everything than they really need. Many of us have clothes closets packed with garments and shoes. We have attics full of who knows what. Then there is the kitchen drawer full of odds and ends and out of date takeout menus. What makes it hard for you to dispose of something? I heard you say memories, fear scarcity, it was a gift, laziness, and no time. These are all good reasons, but I think there may be even more to it. There is something about our stuff, that even when it overwhelms us, we feel we must hold on. When we sit down to purge and create a little bit of order, we are stymied as to what to get rid of.

In today’s Gospel reading we learn about a man who has this problem in spades. He comes to Jesus as one seeking in need of healing. People that fall at Jesus’ feet in Mark’s Gospel are usually ill or need help for someone who is ill. However, when the man speaks, he does not ask for a cure but “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” If asking for healing is a big deal imagine wanting to gain this special knowledge.

After a sidebar on the meaning of goodness, Jesus tells him he must keep the commandments, but names only the ones that deal with human relations not the ones that deal directly with God. The man attests that he has kept all of these commandments since his youth. It is a powerful and earnest statement on the part of the man.

He is so genuine and intense that Jesus responds by looking at him and loving him. Imagine kneeling before Jesus asking how the secret to eternal life and feeling loved by Jesus. That must have been an overwhelming experience.

For Jesus tells the man that in lacks only one thing. I imagine he eagerly awaits that one bit of knowledge which is the core of what he is seeking. But Jesus gives him hard news. He says that the man must sell all of his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. It is then that he can follow Jesus. The moment of feeling intensely loved by Jesus is broken. The man goes away bereft for he had many possessions.

I think in our smugness we feel sorry for this man. He has the secret to eternal life from the mouth of Jesus. Rather than being overjoyed at knowing that he only has one thing to do to gain eternal life, he walks away forlorn. We put this man in his

particular situation acting as if what Jesus said does not apply to anyone but him. Indeed, preachers and theologians have for centuries sought to explain away this instruction of Jesus saying that it applies to only this one man.

We are just as attached to our possessions as he was, but somehow this teaching does not apply to us. It may apply to monks and nuns but not me. It does not even apply to the Church which for centuries stored up treasures on earth in the form of art, jewels, money, grand buildings, rich clothing, and so much more. It is one reason that St. Francis' movement was so popular. He professed poverty in the face of the opulence of Rome and the Church hierarchy. This push back against money, possessions, and power also a part of what fueled the Protestant Reformation a century later.

Jesus knew the allure of money and possessions. He talked more about money than just about any other thing. He knew that money and possessions distract us from God. Money and possessions are tangible forms of security, and we are people who like the tangible. Also, examine how our lives are structured. We spend eight to ten hours a day five or more days a week working. This rules most lives for thirty or forty years, and for some people even more. Compare that to those people who we describe as churchy. They might spend two or three hours at church each week. Of course, there is time for devotions and prayer, but it still does not add up to the time spent working. It is hard to find the time for God in the demanding milieu of life. Where we spend our time is where our focus is. Plus, in the 21st century we have the challenges of consumerism, advertising, celebrity worship, and online shopping to entice us something a 1st century person did not have to contend with.

Jesus knows and we must be convinced that money and possessions are not the purpose of life. Wealth is not a ticket into the Kingdom of God. Wealth is an impediment. A camel can no more pass through the eye of a needle than a wealthy person can get into God's Kingdom. That is scary, because we are the wealthy ones. The more we rely on things of this world the more we distance ourselves from God's world. As Jesus said another time, "No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and wealth."¹

It is a hard teaching and one we will all struggle with throughout our lives. The answer is to always be wrestling with it. Never give into what society teaches. Know that God comes first. Put God first. Do what is necessary to keep body and soul together but never give up on the soul. The soul is your essence. It is what lives on when your body is done. Live for your soul not your wallet, and you, unlike the proverbial camel, will pass through one day into the Kingdom of God.

¹ Matthew 6:24 NRSVUE