

Forgive Us our Possessions (3.1.2020)

1st Sunday of Lent

by Rev. Emilia Halstead

Jesus: *Son*, there is still one thing you have not done. Go now. Sell everything you have and give the proceeds to the poor so that you will have treasure in heaven. After that, come, follow Me.

The young man went away sick at heart at these words because he was very wealthy, and Jesus looked around *to see if His disciples were understanding His teaching*.

Jesus (*to His disciples*): Oh, it is hard for people with wealth to find their way into God's kingdom!

Disciples (*amazed*): *What?*

Jesus: *You heard Me*. How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God [for those who trust in their wealth]! I think you'll see camels squeezing through the eye of a needle before you'll see the rich *celebrating and dancing as they enter into the joy of God's kingdom!* (Mark 10:21b-25, the Voice translation)

We're going to start this morning with a visualization exercise:

If you had to choose one outfit in your current closet, which might include pants or skirt or dress, as well as a top or sweater... take a moment and visualize yourself wearing those clothes.

Next, if you had to pick one coat in your current closet, which might be a winter or rain coat, or a hoodie... take a moment and visualize that coat added to your previous outfit.

Now, if you had to pick one pair of shoes in your current closet, which might be winter boots, or sneakers, or sandals... take a moment and visualize those shoes as part of this clothing outfit in your mind.

Next, if you had to pick one bag in your current closet, which might be a backpack, suitcase, or purse... take a moment and add that to your image.

Finally, if you had to pick one hat in your current closet, which might be a baseball cap, a fedora, or a winter beanie... take a moment and add that to your visualization – like a cherry on a sundae. For those of you who are literalists, and want to fully complete the outfit, pick THREE pairs of underwear, socks, and bras. That way you can wash one, wear one, and dry one.

Now imagine wearing that ONE outfit, with the three sets of undergarments, for a week. Would you do it? If I said you were allowed to wash those clothes everyday, would you do it? What thoughts and emotions are you currently having and feeling with this visualization? Are you in a sheer panic,

dreading being without everything that surrounds you in your home? Are you excited to try it, anticipating the freedom you'll feel?

Jesus says, "Oh, it is hard for people with wealth to find their way into God's kingdom! [...] I think you'll see camels squeezing through the eye of a needle before you'll see the rich *celebrating and dancing as they enter into the joy of God's kingdom!*"

Next, I'm going to share with you the Working Preacher podcast about this scripture passage, because all 10 minutes are essential for helping to open up this passage and to keep us from squirming out of what this passage really means.

After it is finished playing, I have some reflections that I will share on what they said, as well as invitation for us to work on during Lent. Hear now, the podcast for Mark 10:17-31 with professors: Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, and Kathryn Schifferdecker...

Forgive us our possessions...

I wanna start by reflection on the humor that Prof. Koester presented when he said, "Can we just move on to the part that says, 'With God all things are possible?'" Nope. We need to let the rest of the passage do it's work... Not one of us in this room can afford – pun intended – to pretend that Jesus didn't say this. It is vital to our calling ourselves followers of Christ, that we reflect on and evaluate our addiction to owning WAY more than we need.

A Rich man, not willing to give up possessions... in our current political climate, this gives us another space to squirm out of addressing our OWN wealth, because we can and have often chosen to point fingers at the wealthiest 1%, while all the while there's a great big plank in our own eye. None of us can cast the first stone.

In this room, we are ALL rich, compared to 2/3rds of the world's inhabitants. Much of the world doesn't have clean water to drink, let alone more than TWO sets of clothing. They wash one, and they wear one. When we poo-poo our wealth, by pointing at the 1%, it's another way that we are squirming out of and away from what Jesus is telling US to do.

As Prof. Koester reflects, we practice self-insulation from the jugular hit about possessions, trying to hide all that we own behind our backs, hoping that Jesus won't see it, notice it, or ... make us do something about it.

I think we also need to be careful about asking the question that Peter asks when he says, "I've been following you, what's in it for me, Jesus?" Because Jesus' response is that he offers reward and *persecution* for doing as he asks, like selling all worldly possessions.

One of the immediate things I can see happening, if all of us here today go home and sell everything we own, is that those around us are going to point and say - "Rev. Emilia Halstead is a cult leader! She's leading her congregation to their death! They're all going to drink the Kool-aid!" That

would be one element of persecution, and in case you're wondering, I'm fine with it. Each of us would "hear it" from our friends and families, and tell us we're crazy – that would be a second element of persecution. Any yet, there is a deep part of me that is desperately eager to know the freedom from possessions.

What's more, I resonate with the place of humility for Prof. Rolf Jacobson, in knowing that there ARE people who have given up or sold all of their possessions. He says, "I'm fine – THEY should be first in the kingdom." I get where he's coming from, and at the same time, I realize that that's another way of squirming out of each of our own work with possessions. This isn't about putting others who have managed to release themselves from their possessions on a pedestal. Nor is it about "sainting" them. This passage is about the work we need to do to join them.

The climax of this podcast for me, is when Prof. Schifferdecker says, “Out of love, Jesus sees that the rich man needs to take this step, as his possessions are possessing him. The rich man is not able to follow the call to the true life, in discipleship, because his possessions are holding him back.”

This Lent, I'm inviting you to join me in the process of cleaning out all that isn't essential in our lives, or as author Marie Condo describes it, that doesn't spark true joy. Not because we will gain treasure in heaven, after death – but because we will gain infinite freedom in the here and now.

It might be hard not to point fingers at those who aren't also doing this work, but as my school teachers used to say, “Eyes on your own paper, Emilia.” The work of discipleship is

communal, it always has been and we NEED the support of one another in this community to work on giving up possessions for freedom.

Not unrelated is the reality that we, as a congregation, also need to do the work of selling our possessions in order to be light on our feet for whatever and wherever God is leading us to do the work of the Gospel in Concord and beyond.

As a final thought – as you go through your possessions this Lenten and spring season, when the thought comes up “well I might use this someday” I invite you to pass it on anyway and say to God, “I'm working to let go of all that I don't need. If I should ever have need of something just like this, I will trust that you will provide at that time.” Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit – forgive us our possessions. Amen.