

Owned

Reading from the Old Testament: Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:8-11, 18-19

Reading from the Gospels: Luke 12:13-21

Guilt can surprise you in the most random of moments. Recently, I was walking through our bedroom on my way to brush my teeth after lunch, and I noticed this neatly folded pile of clothes sitting on the bench outside of our closet. I observed that they weren't my clothes and quickly intuited that they were also not the latest load of laundry. And immediately, like a clueless swimmer at the beach, this wave of guilt slapped me broadside. You see, someone had thoughtfully gone through the closet, combed through the hangers and pulled out a cornucopia of clothing representing all four seasons of the year, carefully folding them, and prepping them for transport to the convenient Goodwill trailer, just down the road here.

Someone who has that maddeningly ethical heart, that unfailingly consistent spirit of generosity, and that equally enviable ability to distinguish between a want and a need was set to contribute a tasteful, good quality wardrobe for the benefit of a stranger. Someone was thoughtful, noble, beneficent ... and that someone was not me.

The bowed hanging rods on my side of the closet were straining and cursing with the weight of the diverse cuts of numerous khaki pants, pants not in the rotation for at least a year, but held onto because, you know, as soon as you let go of one, that style will come back into vogue ... and those are quality pants ... labels I could only dream of owning in high school, just like those quality shirts I've maybe worn twice over the last two years. I remember the excitement I felt as I opened the box at Christmas, even though I already knew what was in the box because I had picked it out. Yet, was I to pick that shirt to wear tomorrow, I'd have to brush the dust off of the shoulder.

There are clothes in that closet I can't seem to let go, because I'm still trying to justify why I was so intent on purchasing them in the first place. Yet, you know those times when you dress and check out your outfit in the mirror, and you're thinking, Migh-T-Sharp! You're feeling good. I have a bunch of clothes in that closet that will never give me that feeling.

When building our house, they had to cut the size of our closet to accommodate a half-bath, and sometimes I murmur laments over that reduction. But it's not the size of the closet that's the problem. I don't

need a bigger closet. I need a larger perspective. I need something someone in our house already has – a larger heart.

Yet truth be told, accomplishing a jr. sized Marie Kondo on my side of the closet won't be all that hard, and I will do it, but it won't eliminate my guilt as that will be quickly refilled with the guilt of giving myself far too much credit for providing someone the second-hand clothing I'd decided I didn't want anyway. That's not generosity. That's convenience.

I don't want it, so you can have it is no more a strategy to fight poverty than chasing your hat when the wind blows it off is an exercise program. Generosity, compassion, empathy, these require a consistent willingness to at least open the windows of our comfort bubble to see our neighbors, to pay attention to their situation of life, to notice when they suffer, to study if there are ways we can effectively, reasonably participate in their healing. Passing along that used soccer shirt isn't a bad thing, it can be a good thing, but if it is the only thing, it may fall short of compassion, sometimes terribly short.

In Kurt Vonnegut's classic novel, *Slaughterhouse Five*, Billy Pilgrim is a hapless, time-traveling optometrist whose journey through life bears some of the same qualities evoked by Forrest Gump, similar in that coincidence, innocence, and gullibility make for a strange trajectory of life. For Billy, a portion of this trajectory lands him as a POW being offloaded from a fetid rail car at a prison camp in Dresden, Germany just before the horrific fire-bombing of the city near the end of WWII.

The prisoners were directed to a haystack of frozen overcoats that had been stripped from the dead. Most of the coats were riddled with bullet holes, including Billy's, but Billy's was quite different. He was handed this gummy, stained garment that once it thawed, looked like something made for a jr.-sized maestro or an organ grinder's monkee. It had this immoderate fur collar, a crimson silk lining, and was so small it split in the back, and the sleeves tore off when Billy tried to put it on. The German guards might have classified the gift of a coat as generous, and a sign of their just treatment of POWs, but in reality, it just contributed to the dehumanization of the prisoner. It's not a gift if you have a habit of mocking the recipient.

Following the “gifting” of the coats the guards retreated to a rail car outfitted with candles, bunks, blankets, steaming coffee, wine, and cheese, the total opposite of the POW’s provisions. In a way, war offers a caricature of the human capacity for indifference to anything outside our comfort bubble, our cavalier and dehumanizing indifference to suffering that is not our own.

The problem with the rich farmer in Jesus’ parable today is not that he is rich. The problem is his inability to see a world beyond his comfort and his next want.

The prelude to the parable finds Jesus teaching before a gathered crowd, when an aggrieved heir interrupts the lesson with a plea for Jesus to be his attorney in his battle with his brother over his father’s estate. A colleague was once told by an attorney friend, “I’m glad you don’t have to see how these outwardly grieving relatives act once the will is opened. There is a reason humans didn’t develop claws through evolution, because we would have no discretion in using them, so focused on getting our share, what we deserve, what we see as our right, that we would have destroyed one another long before the invention of nail clippers. An alien observer could conclude that the

human mission statement can be quantified in Sally Brown's letter to Santa as dictated to her brother, Charlie: "I have been extra good this year so I have a long list of presents that I want. Please note the size and color of each item and send as many as possible. If it seems too complicated, make it easy on yourself. Just send money ... All I want is what I have coming to me. All I want is my fair share."

The context of the brother's random legal plea is revealing. Luke tells us Jesus is teaching before a crowd of thousands, so large and packed together that they were trampling one another. Think about it. Imagine going to a Beatles concert and in the break between *Hey Jude* and *Eleanor Rigby* someone pleads with Ringo to help him sue his sister for possession of mom's silver tea set.

Obviously, for the protester in our text, possession has not only eclipsed propriety, but has also become more important than his relationship with his brother. Getting what "he has coming to him" is worth destroying family ties. Having more has become more important than having a brother.

Not surprisingly, Jesus senses this and offers the warning we consistently tune out: “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Yada, yada, yada, Jesus. Thanks a lot.

What possessions eclipse your relationship with the people in your life? Michael and Fredo Corleone. Ray and Charlie Babbit. Kendall, Shiv, and Roman Roy. Hollywood didn’t create such dysfunction out of thin air. Fiction depends on the actual chaos of real emotions and relationships to pair with exotic wardrobes, dreamy sets, and glamorous actors. What possessions eclipse your relationship with the people in your life? Will someone else pay the price for your comfort? At what point does what you have become more important than who you are?

So, Jesus tells a story. A rich farmer has a very good year, an extraordinary return on investment kind of year. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my

soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”

Okay, nothing wrong with enjoying the fruits of your labor, securing your retirement fund through the Equity division of Abraham’s House of Finance. Take your spouse for a getaway weekend at the Four Season’s in Jerusalem, maybe go on a Mediterranean cruise. It’s all certainly within your purview. But did you notice that in his plans for this windfall, he made no mention of the workers who toiled in the fields tilling, planting, weeding, picking, harvesting, loading the current barns and building new ones? Did you catch that he made no mention of a bonus, a wage increase, the addition of health benefits?

Did you notice that with the seismic increase in his portfolio, he made no mention of the community around him, the need for a new school building or an endowment that would provide for the education of future generations? He made no mention of making an investment toward the reduction of his farm’s carbon footprint.

Notice the rich man’s pronouns in the parable – I, I, my, I, I, my, I, my, my, my, you. Aha, you say, there is a second person pronoun in

there! Not so fast, even with that pronoun the rich farmer is speaking to himself.

The problem here isn't wealth. The problem is worldview. The already rich farmer gets a windfall and displays no room in his heart for others, or at least in his mind there is no concern for or awareness of anyone but himself. The noted preacher William Sloane Coffin once said, "Love measures our stature: the more we love, the bigger we are. There is no smaller package in all the world than that of a man all wrapped up in himself." The arc of the self-involved life is inevitably toward loneliness, isolation, and an emptiness that can't be healed with bigger barns. The failure to engage the world around you, to consider the world that goes on after you, and to discern your role in its welfare not only corrodes the self but inevitably forces others to cover the cost of your comfort.

Wildfires in the West, floods in the Midwest, heat strokes in the South and our anxiety is focused on the price at the pump? Collectively as a culture, we are the rich farmer and, if when we're not building bigger barns, we are demanding cheap gas ... now please. But did you read that the Democratic Republic of Congo has responded to that

demand by choosing to auction 30 blocks of oil and gas rights, a good percentage of them located in the rainforests and peatlands of the Congo Basin.

Now we've known for decades that the depletion of the Amazon rainforest is having a frighteningly destructive impact on the environment. However, I certainly wasn't aware of the devastating impact of what scientists are calling an environmental bomb that will go off if we lose the boggy peatlands of the Congo Basin. Peatlands only cover 3% of the earth's land surface, but store up to 30% of the carbon in the soil, storing twice as much carbon as all the earth's forests combined. If a peatland dries up or is destroyed the result is a carbon bomb in the atmosphere.

However, this has not even been on our radar. I know I had no clue about it. What price are we leaving our grandchildren to pay for our comfort? Is that question even something we take the time to consider? In Ecclesiastes we see the vanity and vexation of a similar figure all wrapped up in himself. In the midst of all his navel-gazing there is a voice that injects a word of wisdom. "The wise have eyes in their head, but fools walk in darkness."

To pay attention to the world around us. To truly see the people in the world around us (their gifts, their welfare, their pain and suffering, their value) is to discover and live into our own value. And as the rich farmer is told, we only have so much time to offer our value to the world. To consider our role in the health of the world beyond our barns is to discover that life abundant isn't what we hold onto but what we have to offer. Let that be our aim, and to Christ be the glory. Amen.