

Hoarders Anonymous: What If Up Is Down and North Is South?

Luke 6:20-31

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I want us to just ponder for a few moments our title slide for this sermon series. Interesting--as soon as the flyers announcing this sermon series started arriving in your homes via the U.S. mail, someone emailed me and started confessing to hoarding! I wrote back and said this sermon series is more about me preaching to myself and letting the rest of you listen in! I am embarrassed at all the clothes I have. All the appliances and conveniences. All the stuff. Especially with one billion people on this planet living on a dollar a day.

Did you know the average house size in the U.S. has nearly doubled since 1970? Yet self-storage units are everywhere, two billion square feet of space in them, and they are all mostly full! A book was recently published: *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things* (Frost and Steketee). They tell of the Collyer brothers who were found dead in their Harlem brownstone, amidst 140 tons of collected items--books, furniture, musical instruments, etc. The book explores how possessions exert power over us, and what happens when things begin to own us.

Of course, many of you know about the TV series on A&E, "Hoarders" a documentary that depicts real-life struggles with hoarding and the intervention needed to help people. As interested as I am in the psychology of hoarding, our focus will of course be the spiritual dimensions of it. How do things take over our lives? How does "stuff" dull us spiritually? Numb us to the pain of others around us?

You know, we followers of Jesus always want to find something out there in world that is to blame for the church's anemia, but consider this quote: "It is not scientific doubt, not atheism,...not agnosticism, that in our...land is likely to quench the light of the gospel. It is a proud, sensuous, selfish, luxurious, church-going hollow-hearted prosperity" [Frederic D. Huntington, quoted in *Crazy Love*, Francis Chan, p. 65].

And that leads us to this morning's text. This is not the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5--7) but the Sermon on the Plain (v. 17). In Luke doesn't say, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," as in Matthew, but rather, "Blessed are the poor..." Luke has "woes" as well as "blessed's." Matthew just has "blessed's." But come on, now. Let's get real. Jesus was out of step with the times, with his culture and with ours. But was he right? "Blessed are the poor, hungry, the weeping..." (vv. 20-21). "Blessed" means "to be congratulated." And then the woes (vv. 24-26). "Woe" means "uh-oh..wouldn't wanna be you! I feel sorry for you!" And it dawns on us. What if Jesus is right and we've been wrong? What if what we thought was north is south and what we thought was up is really down? Jesus is announcing a new way, a new kingdom. Jesus is calling us to swim against the cultural tide. Jesus wants us to see the "things" not through the lens of dominant culture, but through the lens of the future, the Jesus kingdom.

Now this is a tough teaching that Jesus lays on us. I would rather Luke had left it out. Remember that Jesus has just chosen his disciples (6:12-16). It's as if he is saying, "OK, this is what you've signed up for. A different set of values. A life with inverted values. Upside down." And he's saying it to us, too.

A few weeks ago, I was on a retreat with several Cooperative Baptist Fellowship pastors in St. Louis. We were able to go to a lecture by David Beckmann, president of Bread for the World. He was talking about how many youth and young adults are getting excited about fighting global hunger, about living more simply, about losing some of the hoarding habits of culture. Someone asked him, "Why are young adults doing this? Where are they getting this?" Beckmann just smiled and said, "They got it from the Bible!"

Sojourners magazine was once interviewing author Philip Yancey about money and possessions. He acknowledged he had made a lot of money writing books. He was very transparent. He said he and his wife had planned to be missionaries and had planned to be poor. Making money actually created a crisis for them. How do we become stewards of large amounts of income and lots of stuff? Yancey went on to say that culture doesn't see that as a problem, but Jesus saw it as a big one. Jesus talked more about that than anything else. What a shock! Jesus sees "stuff" as a danger (vv. 24-25).

This summer we took our grandkids out to ride the go-carts. Lots of fun. But watching little children (and several grown-up children), I realized, our world is obsessed with speed, power and noise. I watched people trying to pass one another, trying to cut one another off. Just a go-cart but bigger, louder, faster...and more...that's is our way. And Jesus expects his followers to share with others (vv. 27-31). Do you see the connection Jesus is making? How we view things affects how we view people. So many times we run right past relationships on our way to our possessions; Jesus calls us to run right past our possessions on our way to relationships.

Jesus drags all the empty promises of culture into the light of day and exposes them for the sham that they are. This stuff cannot ultimately satisfy. Nothing is more depressing than to have lots of stuff and realize it doesn't give you the zing you thought it would. So what if we read the words of Jesus and realized we needed help? This nasty addiction to stuff, this culture of accumulation. If only we could come up with an intervention plan for our obsession with possessions. What if we borrowed the mental health model for a few moments? What if we took a page from AA? We need a weekly meeting to ward off the values and addictions that numb us and enslave us. A place where we can rehearse the values that liberate us and make us fully human. Oh, wait. There IS such a meeting. It's called Sunday worship. It's called Bible study small groups. It's call a new society with new values and new ways of looking at things--it's called the Kingdom of God!