

As a society we are obsessed with making a good impression. We want people to like us, to respect us, to admire us. At the very least, we want to fit in. Millions of pages of magazine advertisements, millions of hours of tv advertising, and millions of dollars in products are dedicated to telling us that our image matters; that what other people think about us matters. And then we are sold a product or a service or an idea that we are now convinced will make us happy and will make us look good in the eyes of others. When I started hearing about a new show on Netflix focused on tidying up your house, I assumed it was another message about how to make our lives look better.

Right around the New Year, my social media was full of references to Marie Kondo and her new show called “Tidying Up.” How many of you have heard of this? Marie Kondo built her brand on helping people get rid of stuff. Born and raised in Japan, her method is informed by the Shinto faith and brings an intentionality and a sense of connection to the whole process. She tells clients to hold each object you own in your hands and decide if it sparks joy. The Netflix show was born out of Kondo’s popular book *The Lifechanging Magic of Tidying Up* which has sold 10 million copies and been published in 40 countries.¹ I decided to watch the first episode to see what all the fuss was about. What I quickly realized is that what Kondo does for her clients is much more than making their house look good. In fact, the aesthetic result of the process is really secondary. When the clients in the show got rid of all the extra “stuff,” all the things that did not spark a sense of joy, their demeanor changed. Surrounded only by items that bring them joy and getting rid of everything else, the clients seemed happier and more relaxed. It really did seem like life-changing magic.

We are drowning in stuff. Our addiction to stuff is killing our souls and it is killing the planet. The people Jesus is preaching to in his sermon on the mount were likely NOT drowning in stuff. The people who were gathered on the hillside listening to his first public sermon were not the wealthy rulers, but those worked tirelessly to meet the most minimal needs of their families. Jesus is preaching to those who due to illness were unable to provide for themselves and relied on the generosity of family or begged in the street for their survival. And yet Jesus still included these words “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

The desire to accumulate wealth and stuff is an ancient one. And yet this desire gets in our way of what is really important. Whether we live in a gold palace or a one room hut with a dirt floor, whether we drive a Ferrari or a Ford Fiesta, our desire to own

¹ <https://www.fastcompany.com/90206505/marie-kondo-got-you-to-toss-your-stuff-now-she-sells-89-boxes>

better and more stuff in order to make ourselves look good is a distraction from what matters and what will bring us true joy – a close connection to God. Now, before we go any farther, I want to be clear what this message is not saying. This scripture, this sermon should not be interpreted to say that income inequality is acceptable, and that poor and marginalized people should just be grateful for what they have. If we are not ensuring that people's basic needs are being met – food, clothing, shelter, safety, medical care, and reliable income, then we are not following the message of the Gospel. Jesus spent an incredible amount of time and energy bringing healing to the sick, feeding the hungry, restoring people's connection to community, and calling out greed and corruption and it is our call as followers of Christ to do the same.

The focus of this text this morning, is all about putting our attention on God - putting God at the center of our purpose. It is a call to let go of worrying about what other people think or what impression we are trying to make. Even the way we pray or worship can be influenced by being concerned about what other people think. We worry that our prayers are not poetic enough, or that we aren't praying for the right things. How am I supposed to hold my hands? Do I stand or kneel? How long should my prayer be? If it is too short will people think I don't know what I'm doing? Jesus tells us to quiet all that noise. God knows what we need before we say a word. Just to make sure he gets the point across, Jesus offers an example of how to pray.

I could do a whole series of sermons just on this prayer, and I think I probably will this summer. But here's the short version... First and foremost, our prayer should re-center our lives and our attention on God and God's ways. Then we ask for the basic needs of humanity. The focus is not on us as individuals. The prayer is not "give ME this day MY daily bread" but rather give US this day OUR daily bread. Bread here could be a symbol for anything that is required for life to exist. But it is not an excess. Just enough for today. We then have a petition for forgiveness and the recognition that our forgiveness is connected to the way we forgive others. The dynamics of forgiveness is another topic that could be the focus of a whole series of sermons. To be honest, I really struggle with verse 15 in this text which reads "but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." I will definitely come back to this idea in a sermon at some point because I think there is more to this verse than meets the eye. I have never considered God's forgiveness of us as conditional or dependent on how we forgive other people. But I think there is something true about the way we are able to receive and accept forgiveness depending on our ability to forgive. The concept of forgiveness itself and what it means to forgive and be forgiven is important to unpack as well. But those are all topics for another time or maybe even discussion over coffee after the service today.

Lastly there is a petition to God to protect us from evil. Again, this petition is not just about a singular individual, but about “us”. Keep all of us human beings from participating in evil. Turn our attention to God’s ways. This entire prayer directs us to what we should treasure. Not jewels, not wealth, not status. Our treasure is relationship and connection primarily to God but also to the human family.

The last verse of the reading for this morning tells us why this is so important. “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Notice that Jesus did not say “put your treasure where your heart is.” I think this is intentional. Jesus says that where our treasure is, where we put our money, where we put our time and our focus, will impact what we care about. If we give money to the poor, we will find ourselves caring more about them. If we give our time to prayer and worship, we will find ourselves more invested in our relationship with the Divine. Our investments influence our heart.

I have experienced this in my own life. When working in retail, I spent a lot of my money on material things, especially clothes. Now, I didn’t have the income to buy expensive things, but I did spend a lot of time and a good portion of my paycheck on “stuff” that I thought would either make me happy or improve the way people perceived me. My attention was often pulled to sales, reward programs, and knowing what the current trends were. I wasn’t obsessed by any means. It didn’t consume my life. But when I compare where I was putting my treasure 10 or 15 years ago to where I invest my time and money now, the difference feels significant. I compare that reality to last May when news began to break about children being separated from their parents and detained at the southern border. Stories of young children appearing in immigration court alone, without legal representation and being asked to explain why they needed asylum in the United States. Images of children and teens sleeping on concrete floors with foil blankets and corralled in chain link enclosures.

I learned about an organization called Together Rising founded by author, speaker, activist and UCC member Glennon Doyle. In what she calls “Love Flash Mobs” Glennon and Together Rising raise money with donations of \$25 or less in a concentrated amount of time. They were launching a love flash mob for these children. After a short period of intense research and dialogue with people on the ground of this crisis, a plan was developed to focus on one detention center and hire enough lawyers and paralegals to make sure that every child was represented in immigration court. This was deemed as an action that would have the most positive impact right away. I decided to invest some of my money in this action. In the first 9 hours, Together Rising raised \$1 million!

Even though my donation felt small, I found myself paying more attention to what was happening with the children at the border. Because of thousands of small

donations, 60 children aged 12 months to 10 years old were all represented by legal counsel AND a social worker. A team of 4 lawyers and three legal assistants were hired and tasked with representing every child in the detention center and their parents. My heart is with those families in some part because I put my money and my focus where I thought God would want my heart to go.

The task for each of us is to discern where God is calling our hearts. To stop spending so much time and energy and money on things that will eventually decay and get thrown away, or things that clutter our homes and our lives. To pull our focus away from managing how other people might perceive us and instead focus on relationship with God, relationship with other humans, relationship with our planet. To invest in things that cannot be stolen, that never rust or decay – things like love, compassion, dignity, forgiveness, wholeness. May it be so.