



Too Much Stuff

By Mary Minette, ELCA Director for Environmental Education and Advocacy

“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.”

Matthew 6:19-21

Last month, one of our summer interns, Julia Lillie, wrote about her discovery that air conditioning and a functioning refrigerator were not where her heart was, that her treasure — and her heart — were with the people she loves and the earth that supports them and gives them life.

The passage she chose from the Sermon on the Mount got me thinking. Specifically, about what I treasure, and what I should treasure, and how I (and maybe you, too?) have way too much stuff. More specifically, it may be that all of the earthly treasures cluttering our closets, attics, garages and storage pods, taking up room in our lives, are a distraction from the treasures that Jesus urges us to collect instead.

Is all of our stuff interfering with our work to build God’s kingdom here on earth?

If you read the magazines and books that abound on simplifying your life or decluttering your house (and they do abound — just go on amazon.com and search for “declutter”), they often speak about the “relief” that comes from having fewer things. They talk about feeling freer and happier when you reduce clutter in your life. This is not really news — we’ve all been told time and time again that money doesn’t buy happiness and that “things” don’t bring real satisfaction. But even though we know that all of our stuff isn’t making us happier, we still buy that new pair of shoes or the latest electronic gadget, and in the back of our minds we still believe that it might change our lives for the better.

A New York Times blogger recently pondered the cost of having too much stuff. He had read about a man who had pared his belongings down to only 15 things, and wondered what it would feel like to have so little stuff. He was inspired to get rid of some things, and to begin to ask a new question of himself before he bought anything more: [“Do I have room — physical, emotional, mental — to bring one more thing into my life?”](#)

As Christians, we might add another question to that list: Do I have the spiritual room to bring one more thing into my life?

It’s hard to keep your eye on heavenly treasures when society puts so much value in treasures of the earth. We live in a country where each of us is viewed as a “consumer” and where what we buy impacts our self-image, our social status, and the health of our economy. This month, the return of children to school is seen as an opportunity for shopping, rather than a time to celebrate the value of education. In December, the dominant message we hear concerns the success, or failure, of the retail industry as we shop for Christmas gifts, rather than the spiritual meaning of the holiday behind the gifts.

Our stuff is not only distracting, but also comes with costs to God’s creation — it uses resources, from the raw materials used to make our stuff, to the energy used to transport it, to the land used to store and discard it. Our abundance of things means that others may have less than they need, and that future generations may not have enough to live a comfortable life.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ tells us that our stuff is ephemeral, and that God’s kingdom is where our treasure should

be. He urges us to stop and think before we store up treasure on earth.

So here's my plan: The next time I'm tempted to buy something that I don't really need, I'm going to try asking myself a question: "What would Jesus do?"

Learn more

If you're thinking about cutting back on the stuff in your life, here are some resources to help you get started: ELCA World Hunger ["Sustaining Simplicity"](#) includes a leader guide, links to resources, and workshop ideas.

The [Center for a New American Dream](#) has resources and reflections that can help you on a journey to less stuff.

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