

Reimagining Manna: Storage Units

Exodus 16: 19-21
Matthew 6: 19-24
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I. Introduction

This week, I had an email appear on my iPhone inviting me to see if I wanted to rent a storage unit to store some of my stuff in, which was very convenient because I'd already chosen that as my sermon title. Modern storage, self-storage facilities began many years ago as a tool for the moving industry when someone was moving from one location to another and needed to stick their stuff somewhere for a short period of time during the move. But in the late 50's and early 60's they started to become a place where people store all of their stuff all of the time. And then in the 80's and 90's the industry just exploded until last year, according to the self-storage association -- who knew -- we had over 2.3 billion square feet of storage available in the United States. We have about 90 percent of the world's self-storage space, as it turns out, which is interesting and I think tells us a great deal about our relationship with our stuff because what it says is that we need to have it even if we're never going to see it or use it again. Because face it, when something goes in self-storage it's gone, right? We're never seeing that again but somehow, we need to know it's there. Somehow, we need to know we have it even if it, frankly, costs us a lot of money for that memory.

This is why stewardship is such an important part of our discipleship journey because stewardship is the way we start to develop a healthier relationship with our stuff. Manna is the image that we're using throughout this stewardship journey, which

will end next week, because manna was the tool that God used to help the Israelites understand a different way of engaging the world. The Israelites had been in Egypt as slaves for hundreds of years and at this point in the story have just been freed and they are moving towards the Promised Land, and manna is the tool that God uses to get them ready to engage the Promised Land, to get them ready for their new life.

II. Lessons from Egypt

You see Egypt, for the Israelites, was a land of scarcity. It was an economy of scarcity and that's not because it was a poor country. Egypt actually was the most economically stable country in the ancient world, particularly in terms of food production because they had the benefit of that annual Nile flood that provided such rich agriculture for the Nile Valley. So many of the other lands in the ancient Near East had to rely on rainfall which was a little bit more variable but Egypt had this very constant source of food which is why the children of Israel and others in that area went to Egypt in times of famine because Egypt had a more stable food supply.

The problem was it was very inequitably distributed so some people had enormous amounts and other people were starving and the children of Israel were usually in that latter category. When you don't know when your next meal is coming or where it's coming from, the tendency then of course, is to hoard, right? We've got to keep hold of what we have because we don't know when we're going to get more. So, we've got to hold on to that tight.

And God is trying to change their mindset, from a mindset of scarcity, from an economy of scarcity to an economy of abundance. This sense that God is providing

everything that we need for our community to live and to thrive and if we work together as a community in the gathering and distribution of that food, we're all going to live rich and full lives.

So, God just gives them this manna as his gift. And of course, the first thing they do when they see bread lying all over the ground is they start grabbing as much of it as they can, right? Because that's what they did in Egypt but this is a different paradigm now and so, all of that stuff that they gather and hoard, the next day, is rotten and spoiled. They can't use it at all. And so, God uses this as a tool over the course of years, 40 years, to re-teach the Israelites what our economic life is to look like: that it is about trusting in God's providence and abundance and sharing God's resources so that the community can survive and thrive. This is all about breaking the mindset of Egypt. The people can't hoard the manna. They can only take enough for the day which means they've got to start living out of trust.

From a clinical perspective compulsive hoarding is a subset of generalized anxiety disorder which means our need to hoard is a function of our uncertainty, of our anxiety and we, dear friends, live in a very anxious period and a very anxious society. So, that hoarding, accumulating, acquiring, is part of the way that we deal with the anxiety that we have about the world in which we live.

I will also share this with you, my dear Metropolitan friends, that many compulsive hoarders are perfectionists. That doesn't apply to anyone here, I know, but see perfectionists don't like to make mistakes, right? Therefore, if you're faced with a decision about keeping something and letting something go, there's always a risk that

you could let the wrong thing go, right? You could make a mistake and therefore, we've just got to keep it all. That way we avoid the risk of making any mistakes.

I would argue that our acquisitiveness, in general, is an expression of our anxiety. It is, at its root, an inability or an unwillingness to trust in God. And that worldview shapes everything around us. We look at this story about the Israelites. The Israelites, as you remember from last week's scripture passage, start this dialogue by coming to Moses and grumbling and saying, "Wow, we had it so good in Egypt. We had all that food that we needed. What's going to happen to us now?" Their anxiety was such that they even looked back at their slavery with rose-colored glasses.

Our anxiety shapes the way we view everything in the world and as Jesus says in our gospel lesson today, "If your eye is whole, your whole body is filled with light. But if your eye is diseased, your whole body is filled with darkness." What God wants the children of Israel to do is start looking through whole eyes at a world that is rich in God's abundance and God's grace.

III. The Gift of Giving

So, our stewardship journey is about trying to get new eyes to see the world with, to rid ourselves of our addictive behavior around acquiring things and live out of an abundant sense of trust in God. Now, as with any addictive behaviors we are probably not going to make dramatic changes overnight and so, the reason we address stewardship every year is so that we have this ongoing opportunity to change who we are.

I say that because I'm going to give you a couple of suggestions that I want you to work on this week and they're not huge, but I would encourage you not to necessarily try to become St. Francis of Assisi over this period, right? St. Francis gave away all of his stuff as a celebration of God's gifts and God's commitment to serve those who are hungry. Start small and I want you to start this week spending a little time thinking about what are the things in your life that you have a compulsive need to acquire. All of us have these things.

I'm going to share with you one of mine that is not embarrassing. I have a need to purchase books. Now, books are good, right? We all like books. I know in my heart of hearts that if I stop working today and made reading my full-time job, it would take me a lot of years to work through my current list of "to reads," I know that and yet I've got this compulsion that when one of you says, "Oh, there's this great book that came out." I'm going to go, "I should get that." I'm never going to read it. I love you but I'm not reading it. That's not happening but I've got to buy it, I've got to have it, right?

All of us have those pieces, those places in our life and so what I want to invite you to do this week is spend a little bit of time looking at, "What are those places that I feel compelled to buy something that I really may not absolutely need?"

And I want you to practice a good 12-step discipline which is, don't just say, "I'm never going to do it again," because you are, we all are. I want you to say to yourself, "I'm not going to do it today, just today." Somebody's going to say, "Oh, you should

read this book.” And just today I’m going to say, “I don’t need to buy that, don’t need to do it.”

And I want you to take the money that you didn’t spend and do something for somebody else with it. It may not be a lot of money, it may just be a book that you were going to buy but you know what? That will buy a sandwich for the guy who’s panhandling by that Metro stop or that will buy flowers for your spouse or it could be a few extra dollars that you could put in the collection plate. Find something to do with that money for somebody else this week. It’s a very small thing. Try it, because what happens is, it’s those tiny things that as we get in the habit of them, start to change how we think, start to change our sense of attachment to our stuff.

And then, of course, for those of you who are Metropolitan regulars I want you to take an extra step this week because you’ve all received in the mail or will receive tomorrow the annual Stewardship materials that our church produces that talk about all of the incredibly wonderful ministries in which we are engaged and invite your financial support. So, I would also like you to do some thinking and praying about what you can do to support the financial life of our church.

In our gospel lesson, Jesus tells the disciples to not store up our treasures where moth and rust and thieves can get at them but to store up treasures in heaven. What Jesus is inviting us to think about is, “What are the things that we value and how do we demonstrate that?” So, what I want you to do is think about the amazing work that our church is engaged in and the role the church plays in your life and how you can reflect that through your giving. And what I want you to think about -- this is not a

dollar challenge, it's a psychological challenge. I want you to think about what gift you can make to the church that is going to make you a little bit uncomfortable because it may mean that you have to acquire one less thing that you have been planning on.

In other words, this Stewardship process should be about reprioritizing who we are and what we value or — I shouldn't even say that. It's not reprioritizing what we value; it's putting legs on what we say we value. It's putting substance on the words that we use about who we are and what we value and again, this has a dual function. It both provides for some incredibly rich ministry and it's the antidote for our compulsive, addictive need to acquire stuff that will largely, eventually find its way to a storage unit someplace. So, spend some time thinking about that and write it down because it's when pencil hits paper that it becomes real.

IV. Conclusion

You all know that I used to run a social service agency working with seniors in the Shaw neighborhood, and an older woman rented a row house on the very north boundary of our service area on Florida Avenue. The row house that she was renting caught fire and the fire trucks raced to the scene, but they couldn't get into the house because it was filled with stuff and she died.

That's a tragic story. It's also a powerful metaphor for the role stuff plays in our life. And what Stewardship is about is figuring out the places that we can let go of some of that addictive behavior and open up our lives to experience the resurrection power that God is always seeking to share with us.

Amen.

