

The Third Sunday in Lent
March 8, 2015
Exodus 20:1-17; John 2:13-22
Pr. Craig Mueller

Lent Declutter: Get Your House In Order



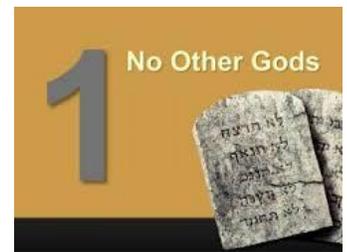
Are you ever in a dull conversation that goes nowhere? One writer (Pamela Druckerman) discovered the topic that got people talking: how everybody seems to be waging their own battle against stuff. One woman in the French fashion industry said she doesn't buy anything these days—no clothes, no shoes, no accessories. A New Yorker quipped: "There's too much in my head, there's too much stuff in my house, too." Another guy said that when his girlfriend gets angry, she calls him the clutter of her life!

Dealing with clutter isn't anything new. But now, if you're not living up to your potential, clutter is blamed as a culprit. "The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up" is a bestseller. The premise: once your house is in order, you can "pour your time and passion into what brings you the most joy, your mission in life."

Isn't that Lent? A yearly taking stock of what gets in the way. In the way of God. In the way of our neighbor flourishing, the earth flourishing, our community flourishing, ourselves flourishing. By fasting, we examine the excess that suffocates. By recommitting to prayer, we return to worship as priority. By practicing almsgiving, we discover a lightness in generosity, in giving away.

You shall have no other gods before me. So begins the Ten Commandments. No problem right. We're monotheists. We believe in one God. We don't worship a golden calf. Our sophisticated worldview keeps us from silly superstitions. No idols on our dashboards.

But are we being duped? Theologian Paul Tillich defines god as whatever we make our ultimate concern. Even if you don't believe in a god, you have one. Or many.



Sometimes gods in modern costumes are defined as the "isms" that permeate our lives: racism, sexism, ageism, nationalism, heterosexism, consumerism, militarism. there are many, many gods to which we bow. As one author puts it, "all attempts to organize life apart from the revolutionary purposes of God's freedom."

So does the clutter in our heads and in our houses keep us from experiencing freedom?

Joshua Fields Milburn and Ryan Nicodemus—now that's a last name—write and speak about minimalism. Not only getting rid of material possessions. Not only decluttering and detaching. Paring down and letting go.

But making room for more. They say that there's nothing wrong with stuff and working 9-5, but when we put these things first, we lose sight of priorities and life's purpose. When we clear the clutter from our lives, we focus on everything that remains.

And what a wonderful list that is: health ... relationships ... growth ... contribution ... and community.

Isn't that what we do together in worship each Lord's Day? Gather around what matters. Receive God's mercy and forgiveness. Take in strength and energy from one another. From the scriptures and sacraments. And then get a divine reboot for the week ahead.

Ryan and Joshua lived the discontent. As they approached thirty, they had the six-figure jobs, nice cars, big houses with more bedrooms than inhabitants, masses of toys and superfluous stuff. But they also had debt, stress, anxiety, loneliness and depression. There had to be another way, they thought.

We too gather to learn another way. Lent, our yearly retreat, calls us to simplify. To struggle with all that keeps us from God and neighbor.



There seems to be plenty clutter and chaos in the temple as Jesus enters, full of righteous anger. Like the prophets before him, he doesn't question his own religious tradition. But rather whether worship and care for the poor is being compromised. We are told he is there for the Passover, a feast celebrating deliverance. Yet what he finds is oppression. God's house becomes a supermarket where greed gets in the way of access. Temple personnel get richer as the poor become poorer.

In our context of advertising and consumerism, religion and marketplace are merged. After all, we church shop, right? Yet what packaging obscures what is at the heart of it all? What is the clutter in our own religious tradition that keeps people from experiencing freedom? And in a week when both Selma and Ferguson are in the news, what clutter—what wounds live on—that keep us all in bondage?

God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, Paul writes. We proclaim Christ crucified. Amid the clutter all around us, Lent calls us again to the great mystery: that life arises from death.

Stop making my Father's house a marketplace, Jesus says. The Lenten call to get our house in order. Not only our residences. But our communities, our churches, our temples.

Our temples? Jesus speaks of the temple of his body. For us, he is the locus of God's presence. But that body—that temple—is also us, the body of Christ. The body of Christ we share at the table. The body of Christ we become in the world.

As we worship, as we remember the sabbath and seek the rest that only God can give, clutter falls away. Unimportant things fade into the background. And we join with the psalmist in delighting in the law of God, the Torah, the teaching, the abundant life. For it fills us. Revives the soul. Gives wisdom to the simple. Gives light to the eyes. It is more desired than gold, sweeter than honey.

The blogger I quoted at the beginning ends her post: "The more stuff I shed, the more I realize that we de-clutterers feel besieged by more than just our possessions. We're also overwhelmed by the intangible detritus of 21st-century life: unreturned emails; unprinted family photos; the ceaseless ticker of other people's lives on Facebook; the heightened demands of parenting; and the suspicion that we'll be checking our phones every 15 minutes, forever. I can sit in an empty room, and still get nothing done," she writes.



Maybe the great Lent de-clutter reveals that there is more in less, more in silence, more in emptiness, more in dying, than we could possibly know.

Pamela Druckerman, "The Clutter Cure's Illusory Joy," *New York Times*. February 15, 2015.