

“A WHITE ELEPHANT LESSON,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, October 2, 2022

Congregation, this coming week our church, building on some energetic set-up efforts of these past several weeks, is hosting another great rummage sale. All in one fair swoop church members are coming together to raise money for our ministry together; enjoy fellowship as volunteers, do some major re-cycling, and provide a low-cost shopping option for many in our local community who, limited in personal resources, welcome this opportunity to secure some bargains.

One of the perennial surprises for me is that there is always so much stuff. Every year I think that our congregation may be rummaged out with nothing more to donate. But, lo and behold, the assortment on the tables set up in Fellowship Hall and in the tent and garage outdoors seems to mount all over again without fail. Yes, the rummage keeps on coming.

For many of us our twice-yearly rummage sales have become a healthy discipline. Too much worldly accumulation? Too much stuff and too little room for it? Why not simplify open and open up household space again by donating what’s proved superfluous and unnecessary. Our rummage sale provides the perfect opportunity to unload and all for a good cause.

Unfortunately, if you’re like me, you find yourself not only donating to the rummage sale but also buying stuff to take home. At least in the past, our St. Paul rummage sale has proven to be something of a wash, if not a losing battle. At times we have ended up with more stuff than when we started. My dear wife has consoled me that it’s “retail therapy” at a rock bottom price. Yet I have still grieved a little that, good intentions notwithstanding, stuff can stick to me like a tar baby. Moreover, some of the items really do turn out to be “white elephants,” consuming space and collecting dust.

Do you know how the term “white elephant” as a term for some rummage goods came to be? It’s a fascinating story. Apparently, across Asia albino elephants, very rare and very white due to genetic defect, were regarded over long centuries as sacred. Because they were sacred, they were reserved for rulers and potentates and promptly delivered to royal stables. At the same time, these albino elephants were considered too holy and precious to be put to work. Consequently, they were kept stabled, taking up space, while requiring the same feeding, cleaning, and grooming as any working elephant, without contributing anything. Those poor kings, who had to collect all of these white elephants! Unfortunately for them, it was also considered the height of royal rudeness, if not sacrilege, to refuse the gift of an albino elephant. Not even a monarch in those distant climes could afford to look a gift elephant in the mouth.

Of course, none of my white elephants procured from past rummage sales are anything as

huge or heavy as to those which Asian kings had to stable and feed. Nevertheless, I don't doubt that the small white elephants which I have picked up here and there along the way through three decades plus of our rummage sales have weighed me down and inadvertently cluttered up my life. More than ever, my wife and I dealing with that now as we prepare to make the move from the parsonage next door to another home at year's end.

In a great hymn which we sing this morning, namely "God of Grace, God of Glory," the Protestant minister Harry Emerson Fosdick, who wrote it, bemoans a people "rich in things, and poor in soul." As I consider the display at our rummage sales and the battle my wife and I have sometimes had to wage in making sure that we at least remain collectors rather than hoarders, I appreciate the hazard and danger that Reverend Fosdick so eloquently highlighted. In our consumer society, which emerged with force in the 20th century, to what extent have we each and all given ourselves over to an accumulation of things that don't really add up to a truly abundant life?

There was good reason that Jesus remarked that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich man to get to heaven (*Matthew 19:23*). As appealing and pleasurable as our possessions may be, we can end up slaves of what we come to own and distracted from what should be of supreme importance as Christian men and women-- namely relationships with God and one another. It can happen to any and all of us.

When I was a student at Michigan State University, I studied both journalism and communications, alongside history. A fellow communications student in one of my classes was Robert Urich, who later gained some fame as an actor for television, film, and stage. He was a memorably personable guy, hard not to like. I became a fan of his television series, *Spenser for Hire*, about a Boston detective and ended up following his career. It was a career with some big bumps, especially towards its close when Urich was diagnosed with rare form of cancer and ended up being treated at the University of Michigan Medical Center. At the time, Urich gave a very frank and revealing interview about revisited values.

Apparently, Urich had grown up in a not-so-rich family in Toronto, Ohio, almost at the Pennsylvania border, before winning a college football scholarship. When he married his wife, actress Heather Menzies, best known for her role in *The Sound of Music* as third oldest von Trapp daughter, they together decided to build a multi-million-dollar dream house. With this goal in mind, they started taking every acting gig they could manage to finance construction. However, just when the dream house was nearing completion, Urich got the news of his very serious cancer diagnosis.

In his interview, Urich remarked that the dream house which had been the be-all and end-all of his existence for the past several years suddenly meant very little to him. His goal now was to simply finish and sell it. How, Urich pondered aloud, could he ever have become so totally enraptured with the idea of that house in the first place? For Urich, who survived another seven years, the prospect of his own mortality brought home what was important

and what was not. His wife and three children truly mattered most to him. Under the circumstances, with his life on the line, Urich wanted to spend all possible time with them rather than devoting himself to work, money-making, and house-building. This rediscovered humility and wisdom on Urich's part was informed by his own upbringing in a Byzantine Catholic Church which, despite the distractions of success in Hollywood, had left its deep impress upon him. I found Urich's honesty and frankness very moving and thought-provoking—a lesson for anyone with ears to hear.

All in all, Urich's experience is not unlike the tale which Jesus tells about the rich guy who keeps storing things away for the future and contemplating bigger barns to accommodate it all only to learn that God is about to call him from this life to face final judgment (*Luke 12:16-21*). In the end, greed doesn't really serve anyone. Whether we're ultimately headed north or south (if you know what I mean), we can't take our stuff with us. Even Egypt's most fabled pharaohs ended up leaving all their golden riches behind for others to ransack and ultimately disperse.

I think one of the great spiritual challenges facing all of us today is developing a more balanced and nuanced attitude and outlook on our material possessions generally. Rough as the economy can be for us at any given time, we don't live in a time of Great Depression. Most of us can afford things that would have been unimaginable to families and households like our own a century ago. Almost daily, we have all sorts of consumer choices and options to pursue. Yet just because we can afford something, and it appeals to us aesthetically or otherwise, doesn't mean that we should get it or make it our own. Whether or not we realize it in the moment, there's a hidden price tag on everything we acquire. As I observed earlier and want to reaffirm now, what we seek to own can come to own us. Like the rich man of our gospel story, we can get so entangled in saving and maintaining our possessions that we lose out on life itself.

One of my own goals now and for the immediate future is letting go of all unnecessary accumulation, including even the personal library I cherish. I hope that I can steward it all in such a way as to find recipients who can benefit from its storehouse of information. Meanwhile, as I've told my wife, I've vowed to stop buying more books to add to the collection.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus boldly declares: "If your right eye causes you to sin, then pluck it out. And if your right hand causes you to sin, then cut it off..." For it is better, Jesus goes on to say, for us to meet our maker without an eye or a limb than to sacrifice the prospect of being with God at all (*Mark 9:43; Matthew 5:30*). Congregation, that may be pretty drastic therapy for a bibliophile or book addict like me. But taken figuratively, rather than literally, it does encourage me to think twice and thrice about more accumulation when in fact on the journey from God to God it's not a bad idea to travel light—or at least a lot lighter than I may be accustomed to do. In countering any obsession

with things, we are all well-advised to think more broadly and radically than at first feels comfortable.

Years ago, on the eve of one of our church rummage sales, I paid a nursing home visit to St. Paul member, Ida Schafer, whose picture as a centenarian adorns a West Room wall. When I arrived at her nursing home room all Ida wanted to hear about was how much rummage was in the offing at our impending church sale. Turns out that she had volunteered at one of our very first rummage sales back in the late 1960s or early 1970s. As our visit unfolded, Ida reminisced to me about those first days. Frankly, she said, the whole concept of rummage had been completely foreign to her. When someone first proposed a rummage sale, she had to ask: *what is rummage?* When it was all explained, Ida was incredulous that our church could ever pull off such an event. As someone who had lived through the Great Depression years where you saved everything you got if you had anything at all, she couldn't imagine that anyone who would donate anything worthwhile to sell on Fellowship Hall tables. How could there ever be enough decent donations to host anything but the most paltry sale? Ida thought we would surely end up embarrassed. "What did I know!" she exclaimed, shaking her head as she recalled her naïve. Indeed, to her immense amazement, there seemed to be no end to the rummage available for sale then and later. That conversation with Ida opened my eyes to another world that was less materially cornucopic and less obsessed or preoccupied with things. The abundance of our days can be both blessing and curse.

Today, as we all know, there's a lot of talk about our need for a sustainable planet, with more equitable sharing by all, not ruining the natural world God created for us and entrusted to our human care. If climate change and global warming as witnessed through tumultuous weather are the warning they appear to be, reduced consumption on our part may be very wise, transcending the kind of material selfishness and greed so widespread today. On the flip side the same circumstances may also be militating for even more diligent and thorough recycling everywhere, which would not be bad for the rummage sale business at churches like our own.

Whatever our impending future on this planet earth, it certainly behooves us here and now as a matter of Christian faith to give greater thought to how the acquisitive impulse can swamp, even bury us, literally and figuratively, when the greatest satisfaction and joy in life are not to be derived in things, but in relationships, human and divine, which thieves cannot steal, moths cannot eat, and rust cannot corrupt. In God and Christ, less can definitely open us to more. Learning the lesson of the white elephant and hearing Christ's call to love God and one another, may we do our very best to choose lives richer in faith and spirit than in things. **Amen.**