

“UNCLUTTERED: I – TOO MUCH STUFF!”

Karen F. Bunnell  
Elkton United Methodist Church  
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Matthew 6:19-21

If you’ve ever spent any time in a grocery store checkout line and glanced over at all of the magazines as you waited, you’ve probably noticed that many of them have a lot in common. It seems like every cover has something on it about sorting, or tidying up, or uncluttering. And it’s not just at this time of year – it’s all year round! I know that, because every time I see one I’m tempted to look at it, and I see them a lot!

Isn’t that interesting? Interesting yes, but not surprising, is it? Because we all know that you and I have too much stuff – practically all of us!

I know I do, and I know how quickly all that stuff piles up.

It piles up in my home. You know, when I moved into the four-bedroom parsonage sixteen years ago from a two-bedroom apartment I said to myself, “I will not fill up this house.” So what did I do? Filled up the house – it just happened. More stuff came in than went out. And the more it did, the more stressed I became.

Periodically I would make a resolution to declutter – usually around this time of year – new year’s, and I would invariably start with my office desk at home. Two to three hours and several bags of trash and shredding later, I would feel so good about it, until I turned around and saw the rest of the stuff throughout the house, and then I would get depressed, and throw up my hands.

Year after year of having too much stuff in the house began to wear on me. Your home is supposed to be your haven, but for me, when I walked in the door and saw all the stuff, it was anything but a haven, it felt like everything was out of control.

On top of that was my car. Now, I don’t know about you, but I’m amazed at how quickly stuff can accumulate in the car. I’ll tell you when it became glaringly obvious for me just how much stuff was in my car – when I had an accident a few years ago and my car was totaled. I went over to the repair yard where it had been towed to empty it out, and it took three big grocery bags to get all of the stuff! Can you believe that? Maps, CDs and empty CD cases, gloves, scarves, shoes, boots, first aid kit, empty water bottles, store receipts, ice scraper, registration and insurance information, lawn chairs for baseball games, blankets for baseball games

. . . well, you get the idea – too much stuff! It was embarrassing – lucky no one was watching me as I emptied it out!

And then there was my office here at church too! Thank goodness it got renovated last year, because that was the impetus I needed to start tossing years of accumulated stuff.

Now, I don't think I'm all that unusual, unless I'm kidding myself. I think a lot of you can identify with me. I used to watch "Hoarders" all the time because it made me feel better – at least I wasn't that bad!

All kidding aside – most of us have too much stuff – our worlds are cluttered. One person noted that in a national survey taken in 2008, 82% of Americans felt like they had too much stuff. He went on to talk about his house, and also mentioned his garage (which I didn't). His garage was so cluttered that there's never been a car parked in it in 20 years! Anybody identify with that?

Another sign that we have too much stuff is the proliferation of storage units all over the place – people actually rent a storage unit because they have too much stuff to store in the place they live. And look at the latest and greatest trend in stores – places like the Container Store – which is totally about how to store your stuff!

We have too much stuff, and a lot of us are drowning in it. So why bring this up in church? Well, because in some ways it's a spiritual issue. All of our stuff is blocking us from living the free and full life God created us to live, and it so fills us with anxiety that we never know the peace that Christ came to give us. It also takes the focus off the things that really matter in life. And, once again, it reminds us that we have everything we want and more, while so many in the world have so little of anything they need.

Apparently, we're not the first to wrestle with this problem of stuff. It started early on with humanity – maybe even back with Adam and Eve. Didn't God give Adam and Eve exactly what they needed, all that they needed? Yet didn't they reach for the thing He told them not to? There's seems to be something about having more and more that is part of the human condition.

Jesus talked about being content and not having too much stuff – or as today's Gospel lesson said – treasures on earth. Did you hear what he said? "Do not store up treasures on earth, but lay up for yourself treasures in heaven. For (he says) where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Jesus knew that, far too easily, worldly stuff can be enticing, and when it takes over your life, heavenly things take a back seat.

Why, the devil even tried to tempt Jesus with worldly things! Remember when Jesus was in the wilderness of temptation after his baptism? The devil tried to tempt him with worldly things – he told Jesus he could have it all, if he would just renounce God and worship him. Even the devil, oh, especially, the devil knows how tempting worldly things can be!

The Apostle Paul also dealt with this issue of stuff. In I Timothy he wrote, “Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.” (I Timothy 6:6-8)

Contentment, peace, refocusing on what really matters in life – all of that can come about when we unclutter – when we cut out some of the stuff in our lives. I can attest to that. Many of you know that on my spiritual renewal leave last year I spent ten days straight uncluttering.

I’ve got to tell you that it was brutal. It was hard work – really hard. Luckily I had my brother Jeff with me to keep me going, and I had Kay here in the office when I tackled that – but still it was really hard. I ended up making eight trips to Goodwill, throwing out forty bags of stuff (not trash, but stuff) – things like all of my seminary class notes from thirty years ago, and thirty years of sermon notes that I had saved, among other things. Purple Heart also came and took away a trailer load full of things like lamps, extra kitchen appliances, old televisions and stereos and so forth.

But let me tell you, ten days later, I felt like a new woman. It was so great to come into the house and not feel overwhelmed. Suddenly it was a haven, and so is my office. I felt free – not only physically, but emotionally and spiritually. All of that stuff was getting in my way, and I have a feeling, a lot of you know how that feels.

So perhaps during this upcoming Lenten season you might want to make the spiritual journey of uncluttering. I know it can be overwhelming, but maybe you could start by doing what one pastor did – he started small, and gave away, recycled or threw away, one thing each day of Lent. Another person I read about last year filled one bag each day to dispose of – either in the trash or giving it to someone who needed it.

Perhaps you could partner with a friend, like I did with Jeff and Kay, who will help you face the task, and you could help them. Or maybe your Lenten journey can be to just deal with one area of clutter in your life – just starting with that one area.

There are so many people who could use the stuff that you don’t need. There are so many for whom your gently used stuff could be a godsend.

Friends, once you take on the task of decluttering, you will begin to discover some amazing things. It does give you peace – the kind of peace that God wants you to dwell in. Getting rid of the clutter frees up space in your heart and mind that God can fill with contentment and peace.

Uncluttering also helps you take the focus off of yourself – after all, isn't that how the clutter got there in the first place – you wanted something, you got it, and you got something else, and something else, and something else. The advertisements wooed you, the coupons made you think it was a better deal, your friend had something and you wanted it too. It was all about you, and getting rid of some of that stuff will help you remember what Jesus said – life is more than just about you, and it's not about treasures on earth, but treasures in heaven.

Finally, I think decluttering helps you be okay with just enough. You don't have to have all that much. Look at what Jesus said to the disciples as they went out in ministry – “take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff . . .” (Matthew 10:9) You see, Jesus didn't want them to be anxious about stuff – they would have enough with what they had. It was exactly what he said in the Sermon on the Mount when he told his listeners “not to be anxious about their lives” – that God would provide what they needed – enough – just enough.

Unfortunately, we live in a world that tells us there's never enough, to grab for the gusto, to get all we can get. It's always enticing us to buy more and get more. Every ad we see on television and in print and hear on the radio, tries to tell us how much better off we'll be if we just buy this or that. It will make us look younger, feel better, drive faster, be happier. They draw us in, they woo us into buying their stuff. And so we do. And we get, and we get, and we get, and it piles up, and pretty soon, we're drowning in stuff. It's not the life God wants us to live. It's not the life Christ came to give us.

In the coming weeks in this sermon series, we'll talk about other kinds of clutter – emotional, relational clutter and the clutter that is our crazy, busy schedules. But for now, for this part of our journey, may you and I have the courage to get rid of our extra stuff. Doing that will be a gift – to those who might receive things from us that they really need, to ourselves, and indeed, to God, who will now have space in our hearts.

May it be so.

Amen.