

“UNCLUTTERING: II – GETTING RID OF ANGER AND BITTERNESS”

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Luke 15:11-32

A few weeks ago (although it seems like forever ago now!), I started this short sermon series on “Uncluttering” talking about stuff – and how we have way too much of it. I have to tell you, the reaction to that sermon was fascinating. I heard a lot of confessions and/or tattling from many of you as you came down the stairs that day! I think I struck a nerve!

Since then, I’ve continued to hear things about it, and particularly reports about how some of you have started decluttering some of the stuff with which you’ve been overwhelmed. I think this snow time over the past week gave some of us time to tackle some of our stuff – including me! I threw out a lot of papers and other stuff from my desk at home this week! It felt great!

Having said all that, I have to warn you that, in some respects, what we talked about in that sermon – getting rid of physical stuff – is way easier than what I’m going to talk about today – and that is uncluttering the emotional stuff we carry around in our hearts – stuff like anger, bitterness, envy, jealousy and the like.

Physical stuff gets in the way of so much – our peace of mind, our sense of control or lack of it, our sense of perspective and so on. But emotional stuff – oh, it can, in some ways, be so much more damaging – it can change the whole of our lives and the joy or lack thereof that we experience. Emotional stuff can literally close up our hearts unless we find a way to deal with it and let it go.

I could have chosen any number of scriptures in the Bible through which to ponder emotional clutter, but I think the parable of the Prodigal Son might be the best of all. For in it, we see what out of control emotions and emotional clutter does to a person – we see the toll it takes on one’s life.

So let’s spend some time looking at this well-known story again. You probably remember it well. A father has two sons, and one day the younger son comes to him and asks for his inheritance. Clearly he asked for it ahead of time, because normally one gets an inheritance after a person dies. But this young guy was itching for it. He couldn’t wait to get his hands on the money that would be coming his way when his father died. So, with incredible gall, he goes to his father and says “I want it now.” We don’t know the dad’s reaction, but I would imagine that it was a mixture of disappointment, sadness and a little bit of fear – wondering

what his son would do with it. What we do know is that he gave in, and gave his younger son the money – and with money in hand, off he went.

Well, that money seemed to be burning a hole in his pocket, because the scripture says he burned through it pretty quickly. Again, we don't know what he did, except for the fact that, as the scripture says, "he went off to a far country, and there squandered his property in loose living." We can only imagine!

Then, disaster strikes, when not only is he now penniless, but the land to which he had relocated is struck by a famine, and everyone is starving, including him. I wonder when it finally occurred to him just how wrong he had been? Maybe when he was working feeding pigs, and suddenly had the realization that he wouldn't mind eating some of the food the pigs were getting!

Anyway, he finally did have that aha moment, that "come to Jesus" moment when he realized what a fool he had been. And in that moment, he thought to himself that if he went back home, at the very least he could be treated as one of his father's hired hands, and while it would be humiliating, at least he wouldn't be starving and homeless.

So that's what he decided to do. He would return to his father's house and throw himself on his mercy. He would bow down before him with humility and ask his forgiveness and take whatever was thrown his way. He didn't know what would actually happen, but he probably had a feeling it wouldn't be pretty.

So, off he went – back home – with his tail between his legs, ready to face whatever he had coming. Imagine what it was like for him as he rounded the corner and started up the road to his family home – how frightened he must have been!

And then, like a mirage, he saw the most incredible thing – his father running toward him with a smile on his face and his arms opened wide, and in the blink of an eye, he was at his side, and taking him in his arms for a great big bear hug and a kiss on the cheek! Still startled, I'm sure, yet the son drew back from his father and made his confession, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

But it was as if that no longer mattered, because as soon as he finished speaking, his father turned to the servants and called for a celebration – with the best robe, a ring for his finger, shoes for his feet, and a party to beat the band! He was so happy that his son had come home, come back to love, come back to family, come back to himself!

Oh, that the parable would have ended there, but you and I know that it doesn't. There's another brother, you know, the older brother. He was always

there, he didn't ask for his money ahead of time, he worked side by side with his father; hard work, day in and day out, always doing the right thing, ever faithful. He never left, he stayed, did what was right and good and respectable.

This brother was out working in the field when the younger brother came home to what appeared to be a hero's welcome, and suddenly he hears a celebration going on. So he asks one of the servants, "What's going on?" and hears, to his astonishment, and great dismay, that his father has welcomed his wayward, worthless (in his eyes) younger brother home with open arms and incredible grace. So angry is he, so resentful, that he refuses to be a part of the celebration.

It broke his father's heart. His father pled with him to come to the party, to celebrate the fact that his brother was alive, and had come home, but the older brother would have no part of it. All he could do was lay out for his father everything that he himself had done for all this time – been loyal and hard-working and steadfast, doing the right thing, bearing all the burden; and no matter what his father said, even about how grateful he was for him, it didn't matter, the older brother was angry and bitter to the end.

I want to tell you, friends, there's enough emotional clutter in this scripture to beat the band! Where to begin? Well, with the younger son. Think of the emotional stuff he was lugging around – rebelliousness, restlessness, arrogance (in asking for his inheritance before it was due), immaturity, self-centeredness – well, the list goes on and on. It was all about him – and look at how many people he hurt, not to mention himself – by carrying all that emotional clutter around. He shattered a whole lot of lives going after greener pastures.

I read a little story this week that speaks pretty well to this younger brother's situation. It seems that a young man was proposing marriage to his girlfriend. He got down on one knee, took her hand in his, gazed into her eyes, and said, "I admit that I'm not wealthy like Jerome, I'm not as handsome as Jerome, I don't have a country estate or a yacht or a private plane like Jerome's, but my darling, I love you." To which his beloved replied, "I love you too, but tell me more about Jerome!" (James W. Moore, *Yes Lord, I Have Sinned, But I Have Several Excellent Excuses!*, "The Sin of Hostility," p. 103)

The one who told this story, then wrote, You and I "go through life crying 'What's in it for me?' or 'Tell me more about Jerome.'" (Ibid) He's right. Like that younger brother, too often, it's all about us, we care only about ourselves and what we can get, and that emotionally clutters our lives and gets in the way of the abundant, full and free life God gave us to live.

The older brother, too, had his own collection of emotional clutter. We have a harder time seeing that, I think, because, I believe that most of us identify with

him. I can't tell you the number of times I've taught this parable in a Bible study, and someone will say in the end "That's not fair. The older brother did everything right, and the younger brother is getting things he doesn't deserve"

We get why the older brother is mad. He has done everything right, he stayed, he stuck it out, he worked hard, he followed the rules. One pastor put it this way:

"The world runs on folks like this older brother. Without them, we would be lost. They are the subway conductors, and truck drivers, and airline pilots who drive and don't drink or text at the same time. They are the people who get up early and go to work and bring home a paycheck and stay overtime and file honest returns and pay taxes and serve on committees and volunteer in their communities."

He continues: "I mean, you have to give the older kid some credit. He stayed home and took care of his aging parents even after his younger brother had disgraced the family and run off somewhere, they didn't know where, and ruined the family name. It was the older brother that got up every morning and fed the cattle and walked through the cow flops to get the bales of hay to take to the horses." (On-line, Jon Walton, "Waiting with Hope," March 2010)

That's why we identify with him and sympathize with him – he was the good guy, the loyal guy, the guy who followed the rules and respected his father. But, we see so clearly, that his heart became clouded with emotional clutter – resentment, judgement, envy, hostility, anger, self-righteousness. So clouded, that he blocked out his father's love, he blocked out the love and grace his father wanted to shower upon him as well.

And I'm not sure he realized what he was doing to himself.

Some of you remember Amos and Andy? "In one episode, Kingfish, instead of shaking hands to greet Andy, affectionately slapped him on the chest. This infuriated Andy, and as the show went on, he became more and more resentful. At the end of the program, Andy came in with a big smile on his face and said to Amos, 'I'm ready for him now, Amos. Just let the Kingfish slap me on the chest and see what he gets.' Amos asks, 'Why Andy, what have you done?' To which Andy answers, 'In my vest pocket, I have two sticks of dynamite. Now, when Kingfish slaps me on the chest, it's gonna blow his hand clean off.'" And the one who told this story, James Moore, sadly says, "But Andy didn't realize that, it also would blow his heart right out." (Moore, p. 103)

You see, friends, that's what resentment and anger and bitterness did to the older brother. In his anger, he thought he was going to hurt his father and his

younger brother but what he didn't realize was that he was hurting himself – badly. Or as Moore put it so aptly, “blowing his heart right out.”

Because of his anger and resentment and bitterness, because of all that emotional clutter in his heart, he was staring in the face of love and grace, and didn't even see it. He didn't see the love and grace his father had for him, had always had for him.

Now, I don't know what kind of emotional clutter you might be carrying around today. It might be anger at someone who hurt you, bitterness or resentment over something that happened, fear of someone discovering what you've done, jealousy, insecurity. Like I said, I don't know what kind of emotional clutter you might be carrying around.

But I do know this. The path to getting rid of that clutter, like it did in this parable, runs through the Father – and by that, I mean, through God. By asking God to help you forgive, or stop resenting, or let go of your bitterness or anger or fear or insecurity or whatever. By giving it up to Him, and trusting He will help you find a new way to live.

But before you can do that, you need to trust in His overwhelming love for you, that's always been there, and will always be there; that waits for you when you go astray, and welcomes you home with open arms when you come back.

One of my favorite preachers, Jon Walton, said it so beautifully: “What Jesus wants us to understand in telling us this story is that whether we are faithful droning dutiful older brothers or sisters, or whether we are prodigals far from home, there is One who is waiting up for us, one whose love far exceeds our expectations and our deserving; and who is hoping against all hope that we will come to the party where the invitation is to enter in and make ourselves at home where we are always welcome, deserving or not.” (Walton, *ibid.*)

Friends, may you and I, look on the face of Jesus, and “come to the party.” May we trust in His love and grace enough that we will have the courage to get rid of the emotional clutter we're carrying around, that we might then know the full and abundant life He came to give us.

In the hymn we're about to sing are these words:

O let the Son of God enfold you with His Spirit and His love, let Him fill your heart and satisfy your soul. O let Him have the things that hold you, and His Spirit like a dove, will descend upon your life and make you whole.” (UMH, #347, Spirit Song)

Today, my friends, right now, let Jesus have the things, the emotional clutter, that holds you; let Him make you whole.”

Let us pray:

O Jesus, we hear this story of two brothers, and we know too well their feelings. We too have been rebellious and self-centered at times; we too have been resentful and angry. And sometimes it builds up and takes us over, so Lord, right now, we look into your face, the face of love and grace, and ask that you help us unclutter all of those bad feelings and emotions in our lives. Lord God, in silence now, we lay those things before you. Take these things that hold us and make us whole, for we ask it in your most holy and precious name. Amen.