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*The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up*

Mark 10: 17-31

Hebrews 4:12-16

A few years ago, a little book swept across the nation – *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up*. The book is a guide to de-cluttering and it spent more than 86 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list. The author, Marie Kondo, is an organizing guru who pioneered a new way to organize our homes – or, more accurately, how to wrangle the stuff that inevitably tries to take over our lives. She calls it the KonMari method, and it's a process by which you take categories of things – all of your books, or all of your clothing, or all of your sentimental objects like photos and mementos – and put them in a pile on the floor. Then one by one, you hold each object and ask – *does this spark joy?* If it does, you keep it. If it doesn't, you thank it for its service and get rid of it. Eventually, Kondo promises, you end up with a home filled only with items you cherish – a home that's easy to keep clean, neat, and tidy.

I'm not sure I'm cut out for her process. Not that I have a lot of stuff – I don't. But maybe because I'm the grandchild of hardworking folks who lived through the Great Depression...or maybe because we listened to a lot of Garrison Keillor's Prairie Home Companion as a child with its stories of practical midwesterners... I don't like things to go to waste. I'm not going to get rid of a perfectly functional sweater just because it doesn't spark joy... and is a little misshapen... and has a hole in the sleeve...

I'm not the only one who thinks this way. In America, we have a lot of stuff. There are more self-storage units in our country than there are McDonald's – it's a \$38 billion dollar industry. How many of us have things we don't need, never use, but can't seem to part with? Kondo says that stuff blocks our ability to live full and joyful lives.

In our passage this morning, we hear Jesus give a profound challenge to the rich young man: sell all you have, give the money to the poor, and follow me.

I wonder if Jesus was Marie Kondo before Marie Kondo was Marie Kondo. The Original KonMari?

I'm joking, of course, but there's nothing new under the sun. Jesus certainly was a minimalist. He sent seventy disciples out to preach and heal with nothing but the shoes on their feet and a staff. He inspired Zaccheus to do some major house cleaning, winnowing down his possessions so that he could return three-fold to those from whom he had stolen. So when the rich young man asks the secret to eternal life, Jesus sees right to his heart. Jesus knows that the man's wealth is an obstacle that stands between him and the kingdom. Let go of it, Jesus says. Sell it, give it away.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews says the word of God can cut right through us, dividing soul from spirit, joints from marrow, judging the thoughts and intentions of the heart. This is not a very comforting thought, is it? Luckily, Mark tells us that Jesus loved the young man: Jesus tells him to give his possessions away because Jesus loved him. So out of love, Jesus seeks to liberate the man from his attachment to his *stuff*... so that the man can be free from all that burdens him, free to find his way into the kingdom of God. The man is aggrieved by the suggestion, though, as most of us would be, too. As most of us are.

Scholars and preachers have tried seven ways to Sunday to spiritualize or rationalize Jesus' words to the rich young man. They tie themselves in knots explaining away the eye of the needle – or they say, Jesus was serious but only because that was what this particular man needed to hear. Maybe.

But the letter to the Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is sympathetic to our plight because he has, indeed, walked in our shoes. Jesus knows the comfort and security and... complacency... that money can bring. When he stood in the temple to begin his ministry and read from the scroll of Isaiah – he declared, he came to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free! God came to us in Jesus to set us free... to free us from the shackles of sin and death, to liberate us from all that binds us. And I would venture to say that here, in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, we are bound by our stuff.

Have you seen any of the pictures coming out of the Florida panhandle over the past few days? The devastation is astounding. Hurricane Michael swept whole towns off the map. And for people who didn't have the resources or the wherewithal to escape the storm ... it's going to be a difficult week ahead, with no power, no water, and not much in the way of supplies. I can't imagine what it must be like to have everything you own blown apart, soaked and ruined, with no home to return to, most likely no job or functioning workplace anymore, either.

Marie Kondo's book came out in Japan in 2010, but it didn't really take off until a year later. Anyone remember what hit Japan in 2011? A devastating earthquake and tsunami. In the wake of overwhelming loss and terrible destruction, "the Japanese people suddenly had to ask themselves what was important in their lives. What was the true value of sentimental items? What was the meaning of the items they'd lost? What was the meaning of life?"<sup>1</sup> As people struggled to recover and make meaning in the midst of tremendous loss, Kondo's approach helped. I'd venture to guess that most of us could benefit from stepping back to take stock of what we have, what we value, and realize how little of it we actually need.

On Wednesday night of this past week, we heard Kimberly Smith Highland tell the remarkable story of her work with orphans in the Sudan through her organization, Make

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<sup>1</sup> Tomohiro Takahashi, qtd in "Marie Kondo will Change Your Life (or at least your living space)" by Molly Young, *The Cut*, New York Magazine, 2015.

Way Partners. She talked about 156 children sleeping on cots outside, cobbling together safe space in the midst of a war zone. Making a home out of nothing. As I tried to wrap my head around her work, work undertaken at terrible personal risk out of compassion for vulnerable children... it occurred to me that Jesus' words to the rich young man are true.

Nothing is impossible with God. With God all things are possible.

Our stewardship campaign kicks off today. Doug Tilt will tell you more about it in a bit, but know that we hope every single one of us, every single person who values our church and calls First Presbyterian their home in the heart of the city, will be part of supporting it financially this year. And I can't help but wonder the KonMari method might be one way to approach stewardship this year. Holding on to that which sparks joy, holding on to what we need, and getting rid of the rest – Giving it away. Because when we give generously, even sacrificially, it is an act of liberation. I don't want to be held captive by my belongings, or by my bank account. Giving generously, giving sacrificially allows us to honestly say that Jesus really is Lord, above all other things which demand our attention and claim our allegiance. We follow Jesus... Not our stuff. Not our bank accounts or our political parties or our causes. But God.

It can be scary to think about giving so much. The call to give might cut some of us right to the heart. Some of us might be feeling – I don't have anything left to give! You people have taken it all already! I hear you. I am thankful to each one of you for your faithfulness to God and to our church. As part of our preparation to welcome our new pastor in the months ahead, I wonder if we don't also need to take a Marie Kondo approach to both our personal lives and our church programs – sift through what we do and hold onto the things that spark joy, and let go of the things that don't. The session and team leaders are already doing this by setting goals to help us Speak Up, Reach Out, and Build Bridges, and to stop doing those programs that do not help us attain that vision. So that we can be good stewards of our time, energy, and resources. There are limits to this method, of course – some things are necessary to do and to have even though they aren't, inherently, joyful. A toilet plunger and, well, using it. I digress.

Stewardship is an act of faith. And you all are faithful people: did you know there is a homeless woman who gives \$50 to the church every time she gets her disability check? There was an unemployed member who still managed to make their pledge last year. There is a woman on a fixed income who gives more than a tithe each year. You are a living example of Christ's promise – that God's grace is sufficient to our calling, and that even when it seems that there is no way, God will make a way, because for God, all things are possible! Thanks be to God!