

Cynthia Briggs Kittredge
 Church of the Good Shepherd
 “A Place for Your Stuff”
 August 4, 2019
 Luke 12:13-21

Years ago my husband Frank and I went to see a live performance by the comedian George Carlin. One of his famous monologues is called “A Place for Your Stuff.” Carlin asks the audience:

“You got your stuff with you? I’ll bet you do. Guys have stuff in their pockets; women have stuff in their purses. Of course, some women have pockets, and guys have purses. That’s okay. There’s all different ways of carryin’ your stuff...

So stuff is important. You gotta take care of your stuff. You gotta have a *place* for your stuff. That’s what **life** is all about, tryin’ to find a place for your stuff! That’s all your house is; a place to keep your stuff. If you didn’t have so much stuff, you wouldn’t *need* a house. You could just walk around all the time.

A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. You can see that when you’re taking off in an airplane. You look down and see all the little piles of stuff. Everybody’s got his own little pile of stuff. And they lock it up! That’s right! When you leave your house, you gotta lock it up. Would want somebody to come by and *take* some of your stuff. “Cause they always take the *good* stuff.”¹

We laughed and laughed. We had three young kids at the time, and our house and our car and our shed were overflowing with bouncy chairs and car seats and strollers, high chairs, diaper bags, pull toys, push toys, bath toys.

We wanted to do everything we could so their brains would develop and they would feel secure. That required a lot of stuff.

If we cared for them and provided and saved on their behalf, so they could get into college, and get a good job and be able to buy their own stuff.

And once they grew up, once this stage was over with, and they were launched, we could stop worrying, take it easy and enjoy our life.

Carlin continues:

“So now you got a houseful of stuff. And, even though you might like your house, you gotta move. Gotta get a bigger house. Why? Too much stuff! And that means you gotta

¹ George Carlin, *BrainDroppings*, (New York: Hyperion, 1997) 36-37. See the essay on this passage, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, *Christian Century*, July 17, 2019.

move all your stuff. Or maybe, put some of your stuff in storage. Storage! Imagine that. There's a whole industry based on keepin' an eye on other people's stuff."²

We thought about George Carlin again in 2012 when we decided to move from Tarrytown to Hyde Park to quote "downsize." We confronted all that stuff we had accumulated – the skis, the camping equipment from boy scouts, skateboards, the trombones and clarinets, electric guitars, they no longer played. Not to mention Frank's bicycles and financial records and my piles and piles and piles of manuscript drafts and meeting minutes. We made multiple trips to Goodwill and Next to New.

But the most embarrassing fact of all, one that we didn't tell anyone and wouldn't even admit to ourselves... over on Burnet Road, *we had rented a storage unit.*

Actually, we had three – but the third one was pretty small....

We felt like fools.

Jesus of Nazareth made people laugh. And the gospelers who retold his stories did too.

"The land of a rich man produced abundantly."

Great news. Good news for the whole countryside! But wait... we hear what he is thinking, our fortunate fellow with a problem?

"What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops? 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.'"

That sounds like a lot of work and very expensive, but he sure will have a place for his stuff.

"And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'"

Phew, ample goods, enough stuff, good years lie ahead. Years ahead, without worry. We are listening ... still laughing... do we hear his arrogance? But then the comic parody... darkens... we begin to worry...

"But God said to him, You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

Poof. Game Over. Thank you for playing.

Jesus makes us laugh and even against our will arouses our sympathy, as we suspect that perhaps it is we who are also "fools."

² Ibid. 38.

Like George Carlin, Jesus shows the absurdity of those whose life is obsessed with stuff, who hoard it, lock it up, store it. Who depend upon it for pleasure and security – relax, eat, drink, and be merry. We pity the one whose life ends that very night. As we are disarmed and surprised, with this humor and pathos, Jesus springs us into another way of seeing things.

“Receive the kingdom of God as a child”
 “She who loses her life for my sake will gain it”
 “Behold the kingdom of God is among you.”

Our life, our soul, we receive as a gift. That life, soul, that spirit, that was breathed into the dust, the dirt of the earth. That respiration of God made us alive.

Life Is not ours to own and save and keep for ourselves.

Life does not consist in gear... or in the college your kids get admitted to... or in a comfortable retirement income. Even an abundance of possessions will never be enough, will never make us secure.

Jesus invites us to live differently.

Yes, each of us will die, but we do not have to meet the tragic end of the unfortunate guy in the parable.

We can turn from our foolishness and live.

Jesus invites the rich to let go of insatiable need to control. He invites the poor to let go of devouring insecurity and fear. The gospels display the poverty of the rich and the wealth of the poor.

All of his preaching... the gist of the good news... points to the kingdom, a community, aligned with the purposes of God.

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.

Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them.

Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.”³

The poet, Mary Oliver, says that this is the one ethical exhortation of Jesus that we should live with and attend to all the time: “consider the lilies.”

³ Luke 12:22-31

Contrast the grace and beauty of the ravens and the lilies with the exhausting effort of the rich man, ordering the contractors to build more square feet, an elevator, and a third story. Strive for his mysterious ineffable kingdom out of time and space, and all these things will be given to you.

Share the treasure, be rich towards God who breathed into you and who scatters the proud and lifts up the lowly.

Live here. Live now.

In the place you inhabit here ... not in the storage units on Burnet Road. Live today - not in the fantasies of future security, but in the fragrance of the just mown lawn or the tang of the salt sea,

Your life, your soul, animates you- whatever time of life is yours: in the floppy infant body too limp for a swing or a walker, in the athletic vital energy of kids in high school, in the well used spine and limbs and eyes of the very old.

Here in this body of Christ, this parish, at this moment we practice together living this other way --cultivating in each other's children and in ourselves -- an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and love God and the gift of joy and wonder in all God's works.

Is that "what life is all about, tryin' to find a place for your stuff!"?

Is that what society is, a world of locked houses, the people inside, suspicious, anxious, so foolish?

Or is it neighbors gathered, rejoicing together when the lost child returns home? Is it like crowds of hungry families sharing bread on a hillside in Galilee?

Here we practice, helping each other, inspiring each other. In a world of scarcity and selfishness, may we be generous, possessing abundant treasure. Rich towards God.

Amen.