

Sparking Joy
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 8C
Luke 12:13-21

In today's Gospel lesson Jesus drops a hint about the secret of life. Jesus, the one God gave so that we could have *eternal* life. Jesus, the one who came so that we might have *abundant* life. This Jesus drops a hint about the *secret of life* and this is what he says: that it does not consist in the abundance of possessions. On the intellectual level, we know that's true. On the spiritual level, we may even believe it. But on the practical level, we often behave as if it weren't true. For example:

I've watched exactly one episode of "Tidying Up with Marie Kondo," but it was enough to make its point. Have you seen it? It's a show about a tiny Japanese woman who helps people declutter their homes. She asks them to consider each possession and ask the question: "Does it spark joy?" In the episode I watched a woman piled all her clothes on her bed so she could go through them one by one. She was embarrassed by how many clothes she had, and as she thought about the reasons she realized that she had bought many of them as a way of getting back at her husband when she was angry with him. She was doing what some people jokingly refer to as "retail therapy." But she had ended up with a mountain of clothes she didn't need, and as she stood there looking at them she realized she had a problem.

Kathryn Reklis, a theology professor at Fordham University, feels that Kondo has touched on something truly profound. She writes: "Since her book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* was published in 2014, Marie Kondo has ignited controversy and delight with her rigorous system of decluttering and organizing. But Kondo doesn't want merely to reorganize your closets. She wants to transform your soul. Watching her new

Netflix show brings into full relief the missionary edge to her work. And it makes a strong case that most of us need saving.

“About halfway through the series, a man on the cusp of fatherhood sits in his garage surrounded by piles of stuff. He is supposed to be discerning between items that spark joy and those that don’t. He reaches for a dented, metal mailbox, the kind that hangs next to a front door, explaining that it was originally on the first house he and his wife bought. He connects it to what it meant to him to buy the house, and to what the house meant to his parents, who are first-generation immigrants. It turns out he has a complicated attachment to an object he has never used and has no intention of using. He turns to Kondo and says, ‘What do you do with an object like this?’

“Kondo gently asks, ‘So you have decided that this is an object you want to bring into your future?’ Immediately the man relaxes. ‘No,’ he says. ‘When you put it that way, I definitely don’t need this in my future.’ He thanks the mailbox for its place in his life (a key part of the KonMari method of tidying) and sets it aside.... That is a lot of emotional labor connected with a mailbox,” Reklis writes. “As becomes clear in the series’ eight episodes, the real work of the KonMari method is transforming people’s relationship to things.”ⁱ

“Transforming people’s relationship to things” may be what Jesus had in mind when he said, “Life does not consist in the abundance of one’s possessions.” But he may have been hinting at an even deeper problem. Today’s Gospel lesson begins with a request from someone in the crowd: “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me!” Jesus stops, turns, and says to the man, “Friend, who made me judge or arbitrator over you?” (in other words, “No: I am not going to tell your brother to divide

the inheritance with you”). But then he turns back to his disciples and says, “Take care! (literally, “watch out!”). Be on your guard against all kinds of greed (as if it might sneak up on you from behind); for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Let me interrupt long enough to say you almost have to be in church to hear a message like that. You are not going to hear it out there, in the world. You are not going to hear it in radio or television advertising. In that same article I quoted earlier Kathryn Recklis claims that “the economic imperative of consumer culture encourages us to acquire more and more things, which the culture promises will fulfill our deepest desires and transform our lives for the better.”ⁱⁱ Jesus says no; that’s not true. He says, “Take care! One’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

He might say it to that woman with the mountain of clothes on her bed. “How did this happen?” she wonders. “How did I end up with so many clothes, some of them hanging in my closet with the price tags still on them?” “Because you weren’t watching out,” Jesus might say. “Because you weren’t on your guard against every kind of greed.” And there’s that word again: *greed*. It’s one of the Seven Deadly Sins. And it’s like its sister sin *gluttony* in this respect: that you don’t know when to quit. Even when your belly is full and the buttons are popping off the front of your shirt you can’t seem to push back from the table, and for this woman, even when her closets were bursting with clothes she couldn’t seem to quit buying more. “Be on your guard against every kind of greed,” Jesus warns, “for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” And then he tells this story about a rich man whose land produced abundantly.

As I have wondered before about this parable, “What was this man’s sin? He doesn’t steal his abundant crops. He doesn’t tear down someone else’s barns. The

parable begins with the simple and unprejudiced announcement that the land of a rich man produced abundantly. The rains fell at just the right time, the sun warmed the fields, and the fertile soil nourished the crops. Perhaps, as in one of Jesus' other parables, the seed produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold. The rich man may have marveled at the miracle of it and thanked God for the bounty of his provision. Is there anything wrong with that? No!"ⁱⁱⁱ It's only in the next section that we begin to see a problem, because in the next section the man wonders what he will do with all this abundance. Listen to the way Jesus tells the story, and listen especially for the first person pronoun: "[The rich man] thought to himself, 'What should *I* do, for *I* have no place to store *my* crops?' Then he said, '*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. Did you hear it? "I, I, my, my," or as Barbara Lundblad puts it, "I-I-aye-yi-yi!"^{iv}

And that's why I sometimes call him "the Poor Rich Man," because he's got nobody to talk to. Marie Kondo isn't there to ask him if these things "spark joy" or if he wants to bring them into his future. The conversation recorded in this parable is a conversation between himself and his soul. He thinks to himself, he talks to himself, and in the end he says to himself, "[Self, or rather], *Soul*, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry!" "Watch out for every kind of greed," Jesus warns, because greed is a sin, and like all sins it separates you from God and others.

I think about the primitive man who sees a haunch of meat roasting over the fire, and all the other members of his tribe sitting around waiting for it to be done so they can share it in a joyous communal meal, a kind of thanksgiving dinner. But he decides he wants it for himself. He drags it from the fire and goes off into the bush where he

hunkers down and starts eating greedily, glaring at the other members of the tribe, growling at anyone who dares come near. Yes, he has all he can eat and a whole lot more, but he doesn't have the companionship of his community. He doesn't have the peace or joy of sharing a meal with friends. That night, with his belly aching from all he has eaten, he curls up around what's left of that meat and sleeps with one eye open, just so no one will take it from him. "My meat!" he thinks to himself. "Mine!" He sounds like that poor rich man talking about "my barns, my grain, my goods." Sin separates us from God and others.

We end up all alone.

And that's why Jesus is so insistent when he says, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Suppose the rich man hadn't been so greedy. Suppose that when his land produced abundantly he had been able to fold his hands in prayer and thank God for his goodness. Suppose that he had said, "Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth, and who has brought forth so much grain from my land that I don't know what to do with it all! What would *you* do with it, Lord? What would you have *me* do?" At least he wouldn't be talking to himself! Or suppose that he was married, and was able to say to his wife, "What should we do, for we have no place to store our crops?" Maybe she would have said to him, "Let's share some of our abundance with our children," or, "Let's share some of it with our neighbors. God has been good to us; why shouldn't we be good to others?" But he didn't ask his wife. If he had one, she doesn't show up in this story. If he had children, or neighbors, they don't

show up in this story. It is only this man, alone in his big, empty house, talking to himself.

And that's why I think that when God finally speaks to him he speaks to him out of pity, not anger. "You fool," he says, as in "You *poor* fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things that you have prepared, whose will they be?" It's not that God strikes him dead because he's greedy. It's just that life eventually comes to an end for all of us, and this man's life comes to an end on the same night he is toasting his good fortune. "You poor fool!" God says, because this man doesn't have anybody to share his life with, he doesn't have anybody to share his things with. He raises a glass and proposes a toast to his own, lonely soul.

Back in 1997 I went to Johannesburg, South Africa, shortly after the end of Apartheid. Our team stayed in the homes of members of Kempton Park Baptist Church, in a beautiful suburb northeast of the city. But during the day we worked in the township of Ivory Park, and that was a different story altogether. The people of Kempton Park lived in lovingly landscaped homes surrounded by sturdy walls, often with broken glass embedded in the concrete on top of the wall to discourage intruders. There were iron bars on the windows and doors of the homes, and heavy iron gates at the entrance. So soon after Apartheid everyone was anxious about how black people, white people, Asian people, and what they called "colored people" could live together in the same city. Some people weren't taking any chances.

But at Ivory Park it was different. The people lived in shanties made of cardboard or tin. There were no walls around the houses or bars on the windows, mostly because there was nothing worth protecting. It looked as if everything might blow down in a gust

of wind, and some things did, but the people were doing what they could to make it home. I remember watching one man cut the grass in front of his house with a pair of scissors and why not? His lawn was about twelve inches deep by three feet wide. There wasn't much in Ivory Park and because of that if anyone had something then everyone had something. If someone had a sweet potato, it would be divided up ten or twelve different ways. If someone had a bottle of soda, it would be passed around.

In Kempton Park it wasn't like that. People had their own things and they guarded them fiercely. They parked their cars inside those heavy iron gates at night, went inside their homes and locked the doors behind them. One member of our team said, tactlessly, "You people are in prisons of your own making." But in a way they were. They were hoarding what they had, guarding it with their lives. They weren't willing or able to share. At Ivory Park everyone shared everything, and because they did there always seemed to be enough. What I remember most of all is the sight of children playing in those dirt streets—kicking around a bundle of rags they used as a soccer ball—and the sound of their laughter, whereas in Kempton Park, apart from the sound of an occasional lawnmower in the distance, there was nothing.

I've been thinking about this passage for a while, about this poor, rich man, holed up in his house all by himself, drinking a toast to his soul. I wonder what would have happened if he had been able to throw open the gates of his house, throw open the doors of his barns, and say to his neighbors, "Hey, come and get what you need, come and share what I have. There's plenty!" The story would have had a different ending, wouldn't it? And even if he had died that night, don't you think he would have died happy?

“Life does not consist in the abundance of one’s possessions,” Jesus said, and he might have said it this way: it is not about how much stuff you have, but about how much love you share. That’s what really “sparks joy.”

That’s the secret of life.

—*Jim Somerville* © 2022

ⁱ Kathryn Reklis, “What Makes KonMari Different,” *The Christian Century*, February 13, 2019 (<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/media/why-americans-have-spiritual-need-konmari>).

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jim Somerville, “On the Road with Jesus: the Poor Rich Fool,” preached at Richmond’s First Baptist Church on August 4, 2013.

^{iv} Barbara Lundblad, “He Had an ‘I’ Problem,” a Sermon for Every Sunday, August 4, 2019 (<https://asermonforeverysunday.com/sermons/c36-the-eighth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-c-2019/>)