

August 4, 2019 8th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23, Psalm 49:1-12
Colossians 3:1-11, Luke 12:13-21

[With structure and quotes (including the George Carlin quote) from Cynthia Briggs Kittredge's Reflections on the Lectionary found in the July 17, 2019 Christian Century. "The Sukkah of Shalom" by Arthur Waskow in The Impossible Will Take a Little While, page 106.]

Grace and peace, beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen.

Comedian George Carlin died in the summer of 2008.

He's known for his profanity (and I'll avoid quoting that today).

But George Carlin is also known for his social satire,

and his brilliant ways of using language, and his insight, and his wisdom.

Over the decades, one of his most well-known monologues was a rife called A Place for My Stuff.

He starts: "You got stuff with you? I'll bet you do.

Guys have stuff in their pockets; women have stuff in their purses . . . 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."

As a writer in the Christian Century says,

"Jesus' parable in this week's reading from Luke is usually known as 'The Rich Fool.'

It could be titled 'Bigger Barns' or even [referencing George Carlin here] 'A Place for Your Stuff.'"

All week long this reading has drawn me back.

It's not a light and easy, early-August-going-to-the-lake kind of reading.

I'm at Target doing what I do at Target, working my internal dialogue about needs and wants, getting the basics for my family...and thinking about stuff.

I'm stuck at a stop light behind one of those big trucks with a Got Junk logo plastered on its massive tailgate, committing their 1-800-Got-Junk number to memory...and I'm thinking about stuff.

I'm listening to a friend reflect on the death of their older brother, a death that came too quickly, too young, when they'd worked hard and taken care of themselves.

They finally thought they could retire and enjoy some travel and their family...

...and I'm thinking about stuff and this parable and Jesus' hard words.

George 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 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."

If we take this parable seriously, listen to it, really hear it, we're left with a variety of emotions, and perhaps some questions.

For some it brings shame or guilt, stuff can seem so impossible.

Maybe it makes you nervous or anxious or hopeless.

For others, the emotion is confusion, and the questions that arise are those we ask when we're trying to make something palatable when it's actually really hard and real, for we know about stuff.

We could get ourselves into a shame cycle and tune out God's word.

But don't do that, God's word is too good and too full of grace.

Three things about today's passage.

First, I notice that all this begins when a fellow in the crowd asks Jesus for help:

"Tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

And Jesus, self-differentiated as ever...doesn't go there.

We may be worried and frustrated and angry, we may be all about fairness and equity.

But Jesus' sense of fair and my sense of fair, they aren't always the same.

Instead, and this is my second thought, Jesus goes to the heart.

And I believe the heart of this passage is about idolatry.

Greed, the writer calls it in Colossians, "Greed which is idolatry."

The man's stuff, our stuff, having a place for our stuff, it's a form of idolatry.

We're making an idol, we're worshipping, if you will, things that are not God.

Remember the 10 Commandments? Page 1160 and 1161 in the back of your book of worship.

Number 9 and number 10, "You shall not covet...", these come to mind.

And the 1st Commandment rings frighteningly true: "You shall have no other God's."

Don't make idols of your stuff, George Carlin might tell us.

Martin Luther explains the first commandment like this:

"We are to fear, love and trust God above all things."

The problem here is idolatry, and it's hard to go to Target, or wherever we go, and not fall, at least sometimes, into idolatry.

I say that by way of confession, not accusation, but confession.

There's another important element to notice in today's gospel:

Jesus' parable is primarily a monologue.

Isn't that curious? Like George Carlin's monologues.

When it comes to stewardship, when it comes to things like *our stuff*, when it comes to big issues like idolatry, **we'd do well to avoid monologues and to seek dialogues.**

Let my mind spin unchecked (and it can spin), and I can convince myself of all sorts of things.

A dialogue, though, a back and forth,

a talk with a friend,

a conversation with a mentor,

a willingness to listen and learn and to be changed,

that's the beauty, that's the power of a dialogue.

Go even farther, and seek out dialogue partners who aren't the same as you.

Make cross cultural dialogue. Seek intergenerational dialogue.

Find someone wise who doesn't look or think or act like you.

We do our best discernment about the big stuff when we do it together, that's faithful, that's honest.

Okay, so that was three things...

Jesus isn't always so worried about my sense of fair.

The issue before us today is idolatry.

And, avoid monologues and seek dialogues.

Finally, do you know what comes right after this passage in Luke's gospel?

The very next line is: Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear.

Here comes the grace:

Consider the ravens of the air, consider the lilies of the field.
God will take care of you.

I've been musing this week about the Jewish harvest festival called Sukkot.

Sukkot is celebrated in the fall, but one of the readings during that festival time is the piece from Ecclesiastes that Yesenia read this morning, vanity of vanities.

During Sukkot, many in the Jewish community will build a *Sukkah*.

It's "a fragile hut with a leafy roof, the most vulnerable of houses."

As Rabbi Arthur Waskow says, It's "vulnerable in time, since it lasts for only a week each year.

Vulnerable in space, since its roof must be not only leafy
but leaky enough to let in the starlight and the gusts of wind and rain."

There's a Jewish evening prayer that pleads,

"Spread over us Your sukkah of shalom—of peace and safety."

In that prayer they don't ask for a temple or a fortress or even a barn with plenty of storage,
but rather a sukkah, because a sukkah is vulnerable.

Our wisdom, our wealth, rests in this truth: we're all vulnerable, life is vulnerable.

The writer of Ecclesiastes knew that, so long ago. And Jesus, too.

And, yes, even George Carlin.

We're vulnerable, El Paso, Dayton, they remind us of our vulnerability, but so does life.

We're tempted, we are, to grab hold of our stuff, we muse about bigger barns.

In our desperate attempts to hold on, we all too often put our energy into idols.

And yet, truly, we're vulnerable and our trust in God's grace and in one another is our greatest gift.

I hardly ever wear this stole but it seemed right today.

Years ago a young woman, just out of college, landed for a season in our congregation.

In the midst of discernment, she asked big questions and yearned for that fierce love of God.

She was around, and then we were praying Godspeed, and she was off to grad school in New York City.

At the end of her first term, she sent me a package containing this stole, one she'd created for a class.

I don't have the letter that accompanied it, but it is a Sukkah of sorts, leafy, fragile, vulnerable.

Vulnerability is our gift.

A very real reminder of God's rich love in our living and in our dying, **a love stronger than stuff.**

Amen.