

Save All You Can
October 16, 2016
Jeremiah 31:27-34 and Luke 18:1-8
Wauwatosa Avenue United Methodist Church

I have two very different stories of people who were “savers.” First, there were two brothers, Homer and Langley Collyer. They were teens in 1909 when their family moved into a three-story brownstone in New York City. After college they moved back in the house and never left. They died in the house in 1947 after someone called the police reporting a foul odor from the house. The police could not access the house by the front door because there was so much junk piled against it. They had to climb through a second story window where they found Homer slumped over in a chair. He had been dead for several days. It took three more weeks to find Langley’s body beneath hundreds of boxes. He had been the victim of one of the many booby traps he set in the house to keep intruders from stealing their “treasures.”

City crews removed 130 tons of junk, including old newspapers, broken down furniture, the chassis of a Model T, 14 pianos, two pipe organs, and more than 25,000 books. The house was in such bad condition it had to be torn down. For decades afterward, New York City firefighters referred to these types of dangerous homes as “Collyer’s Mansions.”

Of course, we know that, with this type of hoarding, there is mental illness present. Yet, we are somehow drawn in to watch TV shows like Hoarders. Perhaps we recognize a bit of ourselves in these shows. I know I had to think twice when I read that 25,000 books were removed from the Collyer mansion. I have lots of books!

Then there is the story of Dorothy Ebersbach. She was born in 1914. In 1933, while at the Chicago World’s Fair, she flew with her father in a seaplane. She earned her pilot’s license in 1939. After Pearl Harbor, she became one of the 1800 women who formed the Women’s Airforce Service Pilots. In 2010, she and her fellow WASPs were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal for their service. After the war, Dorothy went to nursing school at Case Western Reserve University. She went back to Tampa, her hometown, and became a public health nurse until her retirement in 1975. Early in life, Dorothy’s father taught her the wisdom of saving and investing. Though she never held a high-paying job, she funded a scholarship in Bishop Lloyd Knox’s name at his alma mater. He had been a pastor at her home church. When she died in 2011, her estate provided 4.7 million dollars to Case Western to establish the Dorothy Ebersbach Academic Center for Flight Nursing. There was also a bequest to Hyde Park United

Methodist Church which was the largest gift ever given to the church's endowment fund. Her gift provided funds for scholarships for kids who grew up in the church and for those going on to seminary. She lived a life filled with joy.

These are two very different approaches to saving: one which grasps and holds on and one that wisely saves in order to give. In our Old Testament Lesson today, we hear from a God who is trying desperately to work with the people of Israel. They had fallen into a pattern in which the world revolved around them – especially for those who had some resources. If you remember back to Genesis, God told Abraham that he was blessed to be a blessing to others. By the time of Jeremiah, the people felt that they needed to grasp and hoard the blessing for themselves. They thought there was not enough “blessing” to go around. They failed to realize that, in sharing their blessings, more blessing would come. God tells the people, “The time is coming when I will make a brand-new covenant with Israel and Judah. It won't be a repeat of the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took their hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant... This is the brand-new covenant that I will make with Israel when the time comes. I will put my law within them – write it on their hearts! – and be their God. And they will be my people. They will no longer go around setting up schools to teach each other about GOD. They'll know me firsthand.”

There are times when God intervenes in the world first-hand. We read about it in scripture. Occasionally, we get to experience God's movement in our lives directly. More often, God comes to us in one another. For us to no longer need to “go around setting up schools to teach each other about GOD,” we need to be as Christ to one another.

Sometimes, no matter how blatant God is in trying to capture our attention, we don't seem to see. It is like the old joke about the very religious man who was once caught in rising floodwaters. He climbed onto the roof of his house and trusted God to rescue him. A neighbor came by in a canoe and said, “The waters will soon be above your house. Hop in and we'll paddle to safety.” “No thanks” replied the religious man. “I've prayed to God and I'm sure God will save me” A short time later the police came by in a boat. “The waters will soon be above your house. Hop in and we'll take you to safety.” “No thanks” replied the religious man. “I've prayed to God and I'm sure God will save me” A little time later a rescue services helicopter hovered overhead, let down a rope ladder and said. “The waters will soon be above your house. Climb the ladder and we'll fly you to safety.” “No thanks” replied the religious man. “I've prayed to God and I'm sure God will save me.” All this time the floodwaters continued to rise, until soon they reached

above the roof and the religious man drowned. When he arrived at heaven he demanded an audience with God. Ushered into God's throne room he said, "Lord, why am I here in heaven? I prayed for you to save me, I trusted you to save me from that flood." "Yes you did my child" replied the Lord. "And I sent you a canoe, a boat, and a helicopter. But you never got in."

In our Gospel Lesson for today, we hear, "There was once a judge in some city who never gave God a thought and cared nothing for people. A widow in that city kept after him: 'My rights are being violated. Protect me!'" God is like the widow looking for justice. She keeps going to the unjust judge week after week. At times, we are like the judge and God keeps coming to us, reminding us that all we have comes from God. We are stewards.

In his sermon, "The Good Steward," John Wesley talks about the difference between a "debtor" who owes God, and a "steward" who is the caretaker of what God has provided for us.

We are now indebted to [God] for all we have; but although a debtor is obliged to return what has [been] received, yet until the time of payment comes, [one] is at liberty to use it as [one] pleases. It is not so with a steward; [this one] is not at liberty to use what is lodged in [their] hands as [they] please, but as [the] master pleases....For [the steward] is not the proprietor of any of these things, but barely entrusted with them by another....Now, this is exactly the case of every [person] with relation to God. We are not at liberty to use what [God] has lodged in our hands as we please, but as [God] pleases, who alone is the possessor of heaven and earth, and the Lord of every creature.¹

I know there are some people who become anxious when the pastor starts talking about money and how people should use their money. I've heard the statements, "All they ever do ask for money." People begin to think the pastor has his or her hand in their pockets. That is not my intent in this sermon series at all. Yes, this is the stewardship time of year and pledge cards are going out this week. Still, my intent is for us all to think about how we live. None of this is intended to be guilt producing. In fact, I am preaching as much to myself as I am to you. I have been blessed. So have you. If we are like Abraham, then we have been blessed to be a blessing. We sometimes hear

about philanthropists who give huge sums of money to charities to make the world a better place. Most of us will never be in the position to do that. One of my favorite Mother Teresa quotes is, “Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love.”

We have heard stories of people who live simply, even frugally, and then are able to give amazing, transforming gifts to the world – both in their lifetimes and beyond. As I think about this business of saving and the importance of having a plan for it, I wonder about the legacy I will leave. How will people remember me? What will my legacy be long after people have forgotten my name? That is what it means to be a steward in this world where God has given us everything. Si Kahn has written a song that asks the question, “What Will I Leave Behind?”

Late in the evening as light fades away,
In silence we gather together,
Searching the faces of those who are near
Or those who have left us forever.

(Refrain)

What will I leave? What will I leave?
What will I leave behind?
When I am gone, who'll carry on?
What will I leave behind?

Where are the ones who caught flame in the night,
Fired up by the heat of devotion?
Measure their lives by the light of the truth.
They burn like the lamp on the ocean.

(Refrain)

Who will remember the words of the brave
That lifted us higher and higher?
Who will remember the price that they paid
For lives lived too close to the fire?

(Refrain)

Hearts of the ones who inherit your lives
Will rest in the truth you have spoken.
And we will echo the trust that you kept.
And, like you, it will never be broken.

(Refrain)

What *will* I leave behind? What will *you* leave behind?

ⁱ John Wesley, "The Good Steward" as quoted in James A. Harnish, *Earn, Save, Give: Wesley's Simple Rules for Money*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), p. 81.