**Decluttering our Prayer**

A sermon for the 6th Sunday After Epiphany

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You can only resist a trend for so long, and this week it finally happened. I finally bought my own copy of “The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up”. Do you know this book? This is the original Marie Kondo book -- the woman who launched a global movement of decluttering. The core action is to go through your house and pick up every item you keep there, ask yourself if it brings you joy, and then, unless it’s basically a resounding yes, you get rid of it. I’m only just beginning the book, but the goal of the movement is to find joy in letting go of the things we cling to most closely -- and enter into a new relationship with the things we really can’t live without.

We live in the age of acquisition. The predominant ethic of our time is to acquire more. I’m as guilty of it as the next person. More stuff. More money. More information. More toys. More friends. More followers. More likes. Whether we have a little or a lot, we live within a cultural drive that urges us to find joy by adding to what we have. This not universal; there are some cultures and communities that are not structured around an ethic of acquisition, but most of the Western developed world is. From military land grabs in centuries past, to the way our economy has become structurally dependent on ever-expanding growth in this century, to the ignorance with which we extract and consume the natural resources of the earth -- we have actually regressed from an ethos of more is better, to an ethos of more is necessary just to function. I can’t over-state the moral danger of this way of living.

Neither, apparently, can Jesus. Marie Kondo is not the first to offer us a counter-ethic that finds meaning and purpose in a life of divestment and diminishment rather than growth. Today’s Gospel is known familiarly as the Beatitudes. But this is the less commonly known Lukan version of the text that most of us from Matthew. Luke’s Beatitudes are different from Matthew’s. Fewer things are blessed; and they are much more simply described. Matthew says, “Blessed are the Poor in Spirit.” Luke says, not quite, “Blessed are the poor.” Matthew says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” Luke says, “Blessed are the hungry.” Period. Both Luke’s Jesus and Matthew’s makes it quite clear that those with less actually have more. But Luke’s has more to say. His message is not just one of consolation to those who have little, it is also a warning to those who have much. Woe to you who are rich. Woe to those who are full. Jesus is reminding us that the Way of God is the way of divestment, of giving away, and not just for the sake of the receiver -- but for the sake of the giver. The Way of God invites us to ask not what else do we need to be happy, but what else can we live without…to be happy. In the Kingdom of God, less is more.

In a small way, we here at St. Paul’s have been doing a little Marie Kondo, Kingdom of God, “less is more” decluttering, during this Epiphany season, in the Eucharistic Prayer that we have been praying. You may have noticed that the Communion Prayer on the blue card in your pews is a little different than our standard diet of prayers A, B, and C, from the Prayer Book. This prayer was stitched together from two Scottish sources: the Scottish Episcopal Church’s liturgy, and the worship book from Iona Abbey, an ecumenical Christian community that you may recall I visited some years ago now.

I crafted this prayer for us so that we might use fewer words and crisper images to invite us into the mystery of the Holy Meal. For example, the phrase “bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh” communicates the meaning of Christ’s incarnation in far fewer words and far sharper an image than the more familiar phrases “and above all in the word made flesh, Jesus your son, who in these last days you sent to be incarnate from the Virgin Mary to be the savior and redeemer of the world.” It’s not that the latter words are incorrect, far from it. In fact, they communicate *more* theological content than the words of the Scottish prayer. But just as an *object’s* worth to us is found in how we use it (not how much space it takes up on our shelf), a *prayer’s* merit as a written document is far less important than how we experience it in the ritual enactment of our worship. For more than a few of us, especially newcomers, our prayers can sometimes feel like they pack too much doctrinal punch into each paragraph -- they are too cluttered. Some of you have told me that when we use prayer A or B or C you want to linger over each image and consider its implications (and during our Soup and Study this coming Lent, we’ll have that space and time). But in worship, practically we just can’t -- even if the presider *isn’t* rushing. So, for a time, this season we simplify our prayer.

The other technique this prayer employs is silence. It isn’t so much how much silence there is, but *where* it is. If you grew up Episcopalian or Roman Catholic, you may notice that some key words are missing from the prayer: “The night before he died for us, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread. And when he had given thanks to you he broke the bread, gave it to his disciples and said, Take Eat. This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” These words proclaim the historical foundation that justifies our weekly enactment of this most sacred and beloved ritual. They remind us that we take and bless and break and share bread and wine each Sunday not because it feels good (though it does), or because it is welcoming (though it is), or because it means shorter sermons (which we all appreciate!), but because Jesus himself gave this form of worship to us, and told us to do it as a way to remember him.

In our prayer this season, we replace those words with extended silence, introduced by with the priest saying only, “As Jesus took bread, we take bread,” and during which we show the elements to you. The omission of words is not intended to indicate a rejection of the historical basis for the Eucharist. Jesus still said those words even if, for this season, we do not. In fact, the intent of replacing the words with silence, is the opposite: it is to invite each of us to be more active in owning that memory, to give more space to consider how that truth might bring us meaning today. Marie Kondo notes that oftentimes the value of objects to us are simply as “reminders of a time that gave us joy” in the past, rather than how they bring us joy in the present. She writes, “The thought of disposing them sparks the fear that we’ll lose those precious memories along with [the objects]. But you don’t need to worry. Truly precious memories will never vanish even if you discard the objects associated with them.”[[1]](#footnote-1) So too for our liturgy. When we experiment, for a time, in worship with fewer words and sharper images, we are only in danger of losing memories that are not in fact precious to us. And perhaps by decluttering our worship for a season, we will be challenged to reclaim the value of affirmations and beliefs that we say most Sundays, but perhaps actually consider with far less frequency or depth than God might desire of us.

At its heart, Eucharistic worship is about remembering. But it is not about remembering the words. And it is not about remembering an affective feeling of nostalgia evoked by familiar rhythmic patterns and cadences -- that’s anesthetization, not inspiration. Rather, worship is about remembering who we are: as beloved children of God, as friends of Jesus, as people who live counter-culturally to the ethic of acquisition. Sharper images and gracious silences invite each of us to do more of that work of remembering -- to enter into the mystery God offers us, and to find our own words to describe it.

Because to remember means not only to recall to mind, but also to put pieces (or members) back together again: to re-integrate what has become fragmented. When Jesus gave us this ritual “to remember me,” he meant not just to recall him to mind again, he also meant to put back together the members of his body, to re-member the parts of his body, the body of Christ.

And so, we worship each week to re-integrate the joyful messiness of our whole lives -- the good the bad and the ugly -- with the whole mystery of Christ’s life, death and resurrection. We worship each week to re-integrate our church community, to remember that we are more to each other than just friends and neighbors, we are chosen to be a part of the Body of Christ for one another. We worship each week to be a sign of hope for our human community, that broken by wounds and indifference and acquisitive greed, we remain united by an abundant, transformative, universal force of self-giving love that calls to us all.

Whatever the words we use or don’t use in a particular season, whatever parts of the prayer we race through with familiarity or get hung up on by their newness, we can be confident that our worship brings glory to God if through it we re-member the Body of Christ -- which is our true strength for the journey. Amen.

1. Kondo, Marie. The life-changing magic of tidying up. Ten Speed Press. Berkeley: 2014, p.114. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)