

## The Things We Must Relinquish

Colossians 3:1-11

Luke 12:13-21

“But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.”

I started rewriting this sermon at 5 p.m. yesterday when my iPhone pinged me with the news that there were twenty dead and twenty-six injured from a shooting at a Walmart and a mall in El Paso by yet another twenty-something angry white male. I had already received my weekly Saturday email informing me of the five souls shot dead this week in Philadelphia, a relatively light week if you follow these numbers as I do. That adds up to twenty-eight dead by guns over the last five weeks in this city of brotherly love. El Paso averages 18 gun deaths a year. I confess that when I read the news of twenty souls shot dead, most of them probably parents and children taking advantage of a tax free weekend to stock up on school supplies, I thought to myself, I have just about run out of words. Then I woke this morning to news of nine souls shot dead in Dayton Ohio and twenty-six six wounded in less than a minute, the third mass shooting in one week, the 250<sup>th</sup> says the mayor of Dayton, since the year began. Brian, Austin and I could publish a book full of sermons written in response to mass murders and to daily murders in this city over the last decade. Truthfully, I also thought to myself that it is time to retire so that I can stop mincing my words and maybe even dare to do something brave with the rest of my life.

By coincidence, last Monday I had reached out to a minister at University Presbyterian Church in El Paso to see if the Presbyterian Border Ministry might be able to use a handful of able-bodied adults from Chestnut Hill sometime during the month when John and I are supposed to overlap. God knows John does not need my counsel on how to begin his ministry among you. So I thought and still think doing what little we can do at the border to make the lives of children, women and men awaiting asylum hearings in church basements and Sunday School rooms real to us would be a good way to end my ministry here. A half dozen members would return equipped as witnesses with stories that might enlarge this community’s imagination as well as open our individual hearts—a direct counter to the anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive language. That was before twenty died while they were shopping and twenty-six were wounded. Now I wonder if Tim Gray--the minister at University Church I was to talk with in the next few days--will instead be consoling members of his congregation.

Before I saw the news, I actually was about done writing a more light-hearted sermon than the last few I have preached, a sermon that began with examining why we have such trouble relinquishing the things we have accumulated. Needless to say, I am in the thick of doing just that. I had begun to think of *reasons* to relinquish material things and the first reason I thought of, before twenty souls were shot dead in El Paso and nine in Dayton, was to save our heirs the trouble. The second reason was necessity because, unlike the rich man who could afford to build a barn for his abundant harvest, the apartments at Normandy Farms are not that large! Trying to be light-hearted, you see. Then, borrowing a verb from the Black Lives Matter movement, another reason I thought of was to “get woke” to the joy of relinquishing things before we wake on the other side of the grave without our stuff. To illustrate, I was going to tell you about an unwoke old man on his deathbed in a New Yorker cartoon who “muttered to his son (or is it the minister?), holding his hand, ‘I should have bought more crap.’” Again, just trying to be light-hearted.

Ironically, I was going to say--before I heard that twenty souls had been shot in El Paso--that sometimes we are fortunate enough to get woke in the midst of life by some brush with our own mortality. Barbara Brown Taylor confesses in a sermon on Jesus’ parable that some of her accumulated things actually do make her happy: “really nice clothes, for instance, a set of copper-bottomed All Clad cookware, and—most recently—a Parker Duofold fountain pen with an 18 karat gold nib.” But then she goes on to say, “When I wake up in the middle of the night and cannot go back to sleep for all the fears that are taking turns sitting on my chest, it never occurs to me to get up and bring my 13” frying pan into bed with me.” You see, I was truly trying to be light-hearted before I went dark with Stephen King’s reflections on his experience of lying helpless by the side of the road after being hit by a van. You’ve heard this before. “I had a MasterCard in my wallet,” he says, “but when you are lying in a

ditch with broken glass in your hair, [when you're lying on the floor of a Walmart with a bullet in your side], no one accepts MasterCard. [Likewise] If you find yourself in the ER with a serious injury, or if the doctor tells you yeah, that lump you felt in your breast is a tumor, you can't wave your Diners Club at it and make it go away.... We all know that life is brief, but on that particular day and in the months that followed," King continues, "I got a painful but extremely valuable look at life's simple backstage truths. We come in naked and broke. We may be dressed when we go out, but we're just as broke. Warren Buffett? Going to go out broke. Bill Gates? Going to go out broke. Tom Hanks? Going to go out broke. Steve King? Broke. Not a crying dime. But how long in between coming in and going out?" King asks the graduates of Vassar a few years ago. "How long have you got to be in the chips? 'I'm aware of the time passin' by; they say in the end it's the blink of an eye.' That's how long." That's how long those twenty-nine people had yesterday. Sometimes a brush with our mortality or our fear of death causes us to wake just long enough to slow down our accumulation of if not relinquish the things around us.

However, and according to Jesus and Paul, relinquishing the things around us is the easy part. The hard part, I am here to tell you as I think about the twenty-something white supremacist shooter, is whatever it is inside of us that finds us unable and unwilling to relinquish the anger, the wrath and the malice, the racial hatred crouching at the door of our souls. Before he launches into the parable, Jesus tells the crowd to be on guard against *all kinds* of greed. Perhaps Paul is simply listing the kinds of greed we hold onto inside our hearts, greed in this nation for our social status as white people, for instance, when he tells the Colossians to "get rid of...anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive language from your mouth."

Augustine would later call these manifestations of greed "disordered love." "Living a just and holy life," Augustine wrote, "requires one...to love things...in the right order, so that you do not love what is not to be loved, or fail to love what is to be loved, or have a greater love for what should be loved less, or an equal love for things that should be loved less or more, or a lesser or greater love for things that should be loved equally." A few hundred years later in *Purgatorio*, Dante characterizes the seven deadly sins in terms of disordered love: "The proud, envious and wrathful were guilty of *misdirected* love; the slothful were guilty of *deficient* love; and the avaricious, gluttonous and lustful were guilty of *excessive* love." "Get rid of anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive language," Paul commands.

Why, I keep wondering, is that the hard part? James Baldwin did not need to wonder. "I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hate so stubbornly," he writes, cling to their anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive language, "is because they sense, once [they have relinquished these things inside of themselves], they will be forced to deal with pain." Or maybe more to the point of our texts, it is hard to relinquish the disordered love inside us because to do so would be to confront the emptiness of lives lived apart from the love for which we were made. I imagine this is so for us as individuals, but I also imagine we collectively refuse to relinquish these things because to relinquish these things would force us to deal with the pain and emptiness and hate that is destroying our society.

"What a person loves, and how he or she loves it, [what a person hates, and how he or she hates it] will determine the course and character of life, as well as the condition of society," Augustine scholar David Naugle observed. The reason why this is so, Augustine opines, is strictly theological. 'For [God] has commanded, and so it is, that every inordinate affection should be its own punishment.'" In other words, the anger and wrath and malice we hold onto inside of ourselves and at the center of our society is its own punishment. In Augustine's life, the pain created by disordered love was so deep that he could not will himself out of it, "nor could anyone extricate or heal him." Surely that is so for us too. Only the gracious initiative of God in Christ can release our grip on the things without and within that are killing us. That is to say, as God in Christ bore in his body the anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive language of our old selves on the cross. Because we could not relinquish them, he took them from us and thus freed for lives without these punishing divisions: "no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all in all!" Self-giving, self-emptying love is all in all.

I invite you to a foretaste of life without these punishing divisions as you come to the table this morning. And I implore you to return to our deeply divided hate-filled society as witnesses to the love that alone can loosen our grip on the things without and within that really have hold of us and keep us from living the life we were given by God to live together. Amen.