

Letting Go of Stuff, April 10, 2019

When I was in my first call, and trying to get out of that call because I struggled with the lead pastor, I called the bishop and said, What other churches are looking for pastors with my amount of experience? He told me about a couple of other opportunities, and honestly, those situations didn't really tempt me, so I stayed, and that was where God wanted me for those five years. I had much to learn from that pastor.

One day the bishop came to visit our church, and he walked into my office. He saw the piles of paper that were stacked up on my counters, and he said, No wonder I can't seem to move you! I still remember that comment, so apparently it still has a little sting attached to it, but it was true. I had piles of stuff all over my office.

When I took a call to Eugene after five years, I brought some of those files with me, and when I came to Oregon City from Eugene, I brought some of those files from the first church and from the second church. Not a lot, but each time I thought: Maybe there's some stuff here that I'll need, some program I did, some adult educational curriculum, some Bible study that I might want to re-do, some youth program that was helpful. Rarely have I used anything that I brought with me. But it sits there somewhere in my office, in a stuffed cupboard.

When I developed this sermon series on letting go, I saved this one for last, letting go of stuff, because I thought it sounded like the least "spiritual" topic. This is just about clutter, right? This is an organizational problem, not a spiritual one. But I've changed my mind on that. I stopped dividing life into spiritual and secular categories a long time ago, because everything has a spiritual dimension.

As I began to think about these files I was hanging onto, I realized this was a spiritual issue, because it was a *trust* issue. I was thinking that there was something in these files that would save me at some point, some amazing program or clever technique or handy tool that I could count on. And it felt like maybe I was trusting that more than I was trusting God to provide me what I needed. Salvation was in those piles, somewhere. Maybe it was some article yet to be read, some resource I hadn't bought yet.

But Ecclesiastes says, There is a time to keep, and a time to throw away. And I have been keeping for a long time. I am discovering the joy of letting go of stuff, and trusting that I will have what I need when I need it.

So knowing I was going to preach on this topic, I thought I had better practice what I preach, and I began to get rid of piles. This counter in my office used to be jam packed with piles of stuff: newsletters I had never read from other churches; third class advertising from church-related businesses; notes from committee meetings. A few things I actually found a place for in files I do want to keep. But I created a lot of space. But most of it I let go. And now I can put pictures of my family on this counter; now I can display art that people have given me. Those are things that bring me joy.

This corner used to be jammed with boxes full of stuff. I went through a box the other day and found notes from 2009, ten years ago. Here are some of the beautiful things about letting of this stuff.

1. I discovered that there really were no incredibly life-giving things in those files, so now I can let go of that idea. I can simply trust that God will give me what I need, when I need it. It doesn't mean I don't save things now, but I'm trying to save less.
2. With these piles gone, there is a kind of spaciousness in my office. It feels lighter. I feel lighter. It feels like I can dream more about possibilities for ministry. I'm not spending energy thinking: I really should clean up those piles. I feel freed up to think new thoughts, to dream new ideas. The writer of Hebrews says, Let go of the weight that clings to you, so you can run the race of faith better. I can travel lighter now. It feels like the Spirit has more room to blow through my office.
3. Here's another positive. I discovered a few fun things as I went through this stuff. About ten years ago the Sunday School kids made me a quilt of drawings of things they are grateful for. I have it on my wall. When I was cleaning out this box from 2009, I came upon the booklet they put together of their drawings and who drew each one. That very night, I was walking into the sanctuary, and I heard a voice

say, "PJ." I turned and it was one of those kids who made me a drawing, now in college. I haven't really talked to her in years. She was going downstairs to sit in on our NA group for a class she's taking.

I told her how great it was to see her, and then I said, I have something to show you. I led her and her friend into my office and showed her her artwork from when she was a little girl. She got such a kick out of it. And it happened because I had gone through that box earlier that very day. Not a huge thing, but I thought it was serendipitous.

Not only have I let go of some stuff, I have let go of some calendar stuff. I have discovered that the Peruvian/Mexican/Oregonian accompaniment process I have been connected with for two years is not bringing me joy, so I have let it go. I don't think everything I am committed to can bring me joy, but this had become more of a burden than a delight. So I am letting it go. When we can let go of some things in our calendar, then we have room and energy to focus on the things that we are passionate about.

I know some people who are letting go of some technology. Two of my three kids have let Facebook go. They felt the pressure to put cool stuff up. They were spending a lot of time looking at other people's posts, and feeling de-energized by it. So they let it go. I find myself not spending much time there myself.

What stuff could you let go of? Is it time to go through your clothes and bless some other people with the clothing that doesn't bring you joy anymore? Is it time to go through your calendar and say no to some things that don't bring you joy anymore so you can concentrate on things that do?

I watched a Marie Kondo show on Netflix the other day. She's the Japanese organizational expert who advises, Hold up an item. Ask if it brings you joy. If not, thank it, and give it away. She asked the question of a couple of

empty-nesters who had clutter all over the house, What do you want to take into the future with you?

That's a really helpful question as I close this series. What do I want to take into the future with me? Do I want to take this illusion of control? Do I want to take these worries? Do I want to take these regrets with me? Do I want to take this judgmentalism? Do I want to take these piles of stuff? Do I want to take this schedule?

The writer of Hebrews says, Let us lay aside the weight and the sin that clings so closely, so we can run the race of faith. May God give you the strength to let go of the things that are weighing you down, so you can run the race God wants you to run. Amen.