



The New England Church Pulpit

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OUR PLEASURE AND DELIGHT IN THINGS

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Genesis 1.1-2; 24-25

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light; and God saw that the light was good and God separated the light from darkness. And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place and let the dry land appear. And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind. And God saw that it was good. And God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness. And God saw everything that was made and indeed, it was very good.

In an address to the Association of Manufacturers some years ago, Allen Stockdale elaborated on this genesis of the world with these words:

God gave us a world unfinished so that we might share in the joys and satisfactions of creation.

God left oil in limestone rock; and electricity in the clouds.

God left the rivers unbridged and the mountains untrailed.

God left the forest unfilled and the cities unbuilt

God left the laboratories unopened and diamonds uncut.

God gave us the challenge of raw materials not the satisfaction of perfect, finished things.

She left the music unsung, the dramas unplayed and the poetry undreamed.

He did this so that women and men might not become bored, but engaged in stimulating, exciting, creative activities that keep us thinking, working, experimenting and experiencing all the joys and the durable satisfactions of achievement.

And indeed, it is in being co-creators with God that we find our joy and fulfillment.

At the heart of our Christian faith is a belief in a materialistic God. When God created, whether by some instant divination or by natural evolutionary processes, God created things: trees and flowers; rivers and oceans; birds and rabbits and tigers and unicorns; people with spirits embodied in flesh and blood. And when God saw that what had evolved and is still evolving was good, God expected that those beings of the creation that had the mind to perceive should also see them as good.

We are given the ability to take pleasure in that which has been created; we are designed to delight in what we see, what we smell, what we can touch and hold. God would not create things and then ask us to ignore or shun them. But all too often we get out of balance; we can like things too much at the

risk of losing our bearing, our center, our purpose; but we can lose the center just as easily by not liking things enough.

We live in a consumer-crazed, possession-obsessed world, to be sure. And it is too easy for religious folks to condemn material things in favor of spiritual things. But we are not divided beings that can focus on spiritual things without something tangible to direct our thoughts. We are whole human beings with a spirit and a body that leaves it to us to find the spirit in things and the things in spirit.

So, finding the balance is the goal of our faith journey. And that balance is found when we take seriously our pleasure and delight in things. Christians are a people of the incarnation; that is, God being known in flesh and blood. We believe that Jesus was God incarnate and therefore believe that all God's creation in one form or another leads us to God. God is known to us in mothers and fathers, friends, the trees and birds and stars, though God is not limited to these. In Eastern religious thought, it is known as panentheism. Not pantheism, which means that each thing IS God, but panentheism, which implies seeing God **IN** the things that bring us delight and joy.

In an article entitled "The Joy of Stuff," MaryAnn McKibben Dana introduced me to the teachings of Marie Kondo, a wildly popular decluttering guru who asks one specific question of things, namely: does it spark joy? Joy is the main principle of KonMari, as she dubs her method; joy is the North Star, the guiding tenet of things. If it sparks joy, keep it; if it doesn't, re-gift it or give it to a mission resale store where it might spark joy in someone else. (The Christian Century, March 30, 2016)

KonMari asks a different question than most ask. It's not about practicality: will I ever use this again? It's not about repurposing the item: can I make a lamp out of this old coffee pot? There is just one question: does this spark joy? It's a good question for people of faith who are seeking balance between having too much stuff and an extreme asceticism where we pretend that stuff doesn't matter.

Stuff matters. That picture on your refrigerator from your young son or your granddaughter matters. It brings joy. That ring from your mother that sits in your jewelry box, never worn by you, matters, not because it is useful but because it sparks joy. That old broken pocket watch that your grandfather used is worthless in terms of its practical application, but throw it out? Never. Because it sparks a connection with your grandfather, whether you knew him or not.

Judy was going through some boxes last week and came across two pillow cases embroidered with peacocks and flowers. "Where did this come from," she asked. I recognized them immediately; my mother had made them years ago. I can still see her sitting in a chair with this material in a stretching hoop, sewing. I don't think they were ever used for their intended purpose; the joy for her was in making them not using them. She felt proud to have done it. And now, with my mother in a nursing home, her mind robbed of any memory of the past, and often even of our names, these old pillow cases, gaudy as they might be, sparked a joyful memory of good years now past.

Things. Stuff. Gifts from a God who presides over evolution of planets still being formed on the edge of space, the migration of butterflies over thousands of miles to the same place each year and the invention of ever-smaller computers that can be worn on our wrist; who inspires the inventor, the musician, the scientist, the philosopher, the poet and each one of us to spark within us the joy of creating or remembering others who created joy for us.

Perhaps our appreciation of things in a wholistic, panentheistic, KonMarie way can be part of an ethic of responsible consumerism. By reframing things that spark joy from the past might inform us as we stand at the hardware store or the gift shop or the bookstore, asking ourselves the question as we handle an object: does this spark in me joy? Or does the use of this thing create an activity that will spark joy? Even after it has lost its newness and its shine, will it serve a purpose that will bring joy to me and perhaps even to those around me? This kind of question is a mindful way of finding the center in a world that has gone mad with unbridled consumerism and the longing for a simpler way of life. This kind of question focuses the joyful seriousness of seeing things as a means to an end and not an end in and of itself.

The God of creation is a lover of things, of beauty, of joy. The creator God we follow is an innovator who left things undone so that in the doing and in the discovering we as co-creators with God will find joy and fulfillment, divine purpose and peace to share with the world. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

Pastoral Prayer

Mother God, we come on this beautiful spring day to express our deep gratitude for the beauty of this earth we are privileged to inhabit. For flowering crab apple trees, for tulips and creeping phlox, for birds that sing and build nests, for the joy of digging in the soil with bare hands to plant the flowers and vegetables that will bring us joy all summer long. Thank you for these wonders that never cease to amaze us season after season, year after year.

On this particular day, we pause to give thanks for our mothers, those who have given us life, biologically, spiritually, mentally, emotionally. In addition to those who have birthed us, we are grateful for those who have also been our emotional and spiritual foundation during our lifetime. For women who have encouraged, who have gently nudged, who have offered their constructive criticism in our best interest, and who have affirmed us unconditionally, we offer thanks.

We acknowledge that there are those whose relationship with their mother is not always what they would hope for. There are those whose mothers haven't been particularly nurturing or affirming. There are those who have never known their mother. There are many grieving mothers now long gone and others whose mothers are on the cusp of the next life. For these, may this be a day of healing.

May we as a church learn from the best that mothering teaches us, so that we will value your children of this congregation whether they are 1 week or 100 years old. Give us love for the achievers and the underachievers; the traditionally gifted and the specially gifted; those who are confident and those who are shy; those who feel included and those who don't. May we reflect your holy love as a divine mother, that all the best qualities attributed to a mother may be known in this nurturing congregation.

Concerned in love for all who struggle, all who are in pain, all who face death, those in the hospital and those recuperating, we pray you to be near them. Hold them in your care and give them peace even as you give us your peace as we care for them, in the name of Christ, amen.