

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI
Life Lessons from Luke: Valuing
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Ecclesiastes 1:12-23; Luke 12:13-21

It was a great jacket. My parents had gotten it for me in high school for traveling to Colorado to go hiking and backpacking. It was a Land's End down puffer jacket that was light weight and warm down to about zero degrees. I held on to the jacket through all the years we lived in San Antonio when I never wore it. When we moved here, I thought, great, a chance to use it. Yet it just hung in our hall closet waiting to be used. Then came the Polar Vortex and I pulled it out, but it seemed to have shrunk because it was tighter on me in my 60's than it was when I was in my teens and early twenties. I was not sure why, so I purchased other warm jackets to use in Michigan winters. Then, several years ago, I noticed that our assistant custodian was coming to work in the winter wearing a lightweight jacket. He was without a car and so was taking the bus. Instantly, I thought of my down jacket hanging in the hallway closet. I should give it to him...but then I thought, but I may need it. I wrestled for several days with what I ought to do. Then with great reluctance, I took that jacket, filled with memories of family trips, brought it to work and asked our assistant custodian, "Hey, here is a down jacket. Would you like it?" He was thrilled. I was sad. And so, as I read this morning's passage, I asked myself, why do we humans do that? Why do we give so much value to things...to possessions, to down jackets, that we are loath to part with them even if we no longer need them?

The answer that came to me during the week was that everyone needs a Kerby. When I say a Kerby, I don't mean a Kirby vacuum cleaner. I mean a Kerby the bear. For those of you not familiar with Kerby the bear, he was our son's comfort stuffed animal for several years of his early childhood. Kerby went with him everywhere. Kerby traveled on short and long trips. Kerby traveled to church and to the homes of grandparents. Kerby was hugged and loved almost to death. In other words, Kerby was our son's protection against the existential dread of a big scary world. Kerby was that thing that could be counted upon when nothing else could. And this existential dread does not go away. The world is always big and scary. It is scary because we wonder if our lives have meaning. It is scary because we wonder about death. It is scary because there is little we control. The result then is that we go and find our Kerby and give it value, so that we can find comfort and security in life.

If we want to see what this hunt for Kerby looks like all we need to do is turn to Ecclesiastes. The writer of Ecclesiastes spent his entire life looking for his Kerby to deal with his existential dread. The writer applies his mind to finding wisdom...but decides it is all vanity and chasing after wind. In fact, it is in his wisdom that he realizes that the Kerby of wisdom does not work to give him the security and comfort that he desires. He then tries accumulating wealth and comes to the same conclusion. He then tries power, gardens, slaves, wives, wine, and sex and each time comes to the same conclusion that these cannot give him the security and comfort for which he is looking, and thus have no real value. They are all chasing after wind. This conclusion carries over to Jesus' conversation with the man whose brother had cut him out of the inheritance.

Jesus was teaching when a man yelled at him over the surrounding crowds and asked Jesus to intervene in a family dispute. The family dispute appears to be about who gets what in a matter of inheritance. Jesus could have ignored him, but Jesus being Jesus, never missed an opportunity for a teachable moment. This teachable moment does not end up being about the legal interpretations of Torah when it comes to how a family divides its inheritance. The teaching has to do with finding our Kerby. Listen again. “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Jesus then proceeds to tell the story of a man whose Kerby was a new barn filled with grain that he could never possibly eat. The man was using the grain to give him comfort and security. Surprise, surprise though, the man dies and thus the grain brought him neither. Jesus implies that possessions, Kerbys, will not last...which brings him into alignment with the writer of Ecclesiastes. This then raises the question, is there anything which we should value which can give us both comfort and security?

The answer is yes, there is something that has real value and will give us lasting security and comfort. But to find the answer we need to turn to Chapters 12 and 13 of the Apostle Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. In this part of Paul’s letter, he chastises them for looking for Kerby among their Spiritual gifts. What I mean by this is that the Corinthian Christians were bragging that their personal spiritual gifts were the best gift and thus proved that they were better than those who did not possess that particular gift. In other words, their spiritual gift was of such value that it gave them comfort and security. Paul is not pleased with this use of gifts and then reminds them that there are only three gifts that last. These are faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of those is love. And in fact, the Apostle claims that without love, nothing else matters. Then Paul goes on to explain that love is love when it is given away. Love means acting for the other and not for self. And love gives us comfort and security because through love we connect with the God who is love and the source of our being. Love gives us comfort and security because it connects us with the Son, who is love and the source of our salvation. Love gives us comfort and security because it connects us with others whose lives are changed, and through whom other lives might be changed in a never-ending cycle of love. Thus, paradoxically, the only thing of value we have that can give us comfort and security is something we give away. It is something that we do for others. Our Kerby is love.

There is nothing wrong with seeing possessions as having value. Their value can be in the memories they carry, in their function, or in their beauty. All of these things are a reminder of the goodness of God’s creation and the things that we can create. The issue becomes when we pretend that possessions offer us ultimate value, which they can never do. My challenge to you this morning is to go home and find something that you don’t really need; something that has become for you a Kerby, then give it away as an act of love. And in so doing allow the love of Christ within you to connect you to the very source of life, our God who is love.