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“Last Things: Tidying Up”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year C)

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Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1–6 ; John 13:31–35

I have read the best-seller, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*
by Japanese author Marie Kondo. Have you?

In our world awash with material possessions that seem to ebb and flow
like the tides, who doesn't want to get a grip and tidy up,
do a little spring cleaning, and simplify one's life?

Take books, for example. I have a hard time letting go of books:

theology books in my office, books from my childhood on shelves at home,
books from my grandmother's house that I could not bear to part with,
books I want to read to my grandchildren,
books written by North Carolina authors,
books of poetry, books about writing poetry, books about writing,
books, like this one, about how to tidy up... one's books!

Now I have to admit that I find Marie Kondo to be a little left of even me
in the obsessive/compulsive category.

She is over-the-top obsessive about sorting, filing, counting, categorizing,
stacking, folding and prioritizing one's possessions.

Yet I find something compelling about her technique of handling each possession
one at a time and asking the question: does this give me joy?

If it does, then she says to keep it, treasure it, and treat it like it means
the world to you.

However, if it no longer sparks joy for you, then she suggests moving it along,
out of your domain, giving it to someone else who might enjoy it.

After which, she posits, upkeep of one's treasured possessions
should not be such a chore when you've whittled them down
to the essential ones which provide the most joy in your life.

For Marie Kondo, *joy* is the core value to arranging a life that matters.

This Sunday, the lectionary takes us back to the farewell discourse of Jesus
in John's Gospel, his parting words of instruction with his disciples
before Jesus will be handed over to authorities for crucifixion.

The context is their last meal together, sandwiched between the
calculated betrayal of Judas, whose heart is set on selling out,
and the impulsive denial of Peter,
whose heart will be betrayed by his own lips.

After pushing back from the table, wiping mouths and washing feet,
Jesus shares his own housekeeping tips about tidying up before he departs.

Glory, he says, is at stake here. Glory is doxology. Glory is praise.

Glory is the weight of holiness within one's reputation.

The glory of God, the holy reputation of God, will hinge upon the actions of Jesus,
just as the glory of Jesus, the holy reputation of Jesus,
will hinge upon the mighty acts of God on his behalf.

And if that weren't confusing enough, so, too, will the glory of the God-head
come to depend upon the acts and actions of the disciples, of all disciples,
who are about to be left in the wake of Jesus' all too short life.

He addresses them tenderly as little children— little children he calls them—
using a term of endearment and intimacy.

Remember, I am leaving you with a new commandment

and a guiding principle for tidying up and organizing your life together: *love*.
Just as I have loved you, love each other, love your neighbor, love your enemy,
love those whom you find difficult to love, love those who cannot love you back,
love the stranger in your midst, love the loveless and unlovely.
As you take stock of each relationship in your life, as you consider them one at a time,
ask yourselves: does this relationship convey *love*?
It may give you joy... or it may not. That's all about you and how you may feel.
But if it conveys love that honors the holy reputation of the triune God,
then perhaps it gives God joy and makes God's day.
Just as the salient characteristic of the life of Jesus was self-giving love,
so, too, must the identifying marker of the life of each Christian
and of the body of Christ, the church, be self-giving love.
By displaying love, the glorious reputation of God and Jesus will be enhanced.
By displaying love, the glorious reputation of each believer will be shaped.

I have been thinking about this a great deal as I have been tidying up
and getting ready for our new minister to join us next Sunday.
For the past three years, in a way, I've been tidying up for whoever
the new minister might be, getting things decent and in order
for the hand-off and for a smooth transition.
We've cleaned up the roles of church membership and removed names of those who
have moved or have changed their church affiliation, approximately 100 of them.
I hope we did that in a loving way, in a way that honors the call of each person
to belong to a community of faith that suits them best.
We've written and revised numerous policies that govern our life together:
a new child and youth protection policy, a personnel handbook,
a planned giving policy, a revision to the wedding policy.
I'm not much of a policy wonk, but I do see the beauty and necessity of such things:
to protect the most vulnerable ones in our midst,
to guarantee just employment practices and fair wages,

to ensure the future welfare of the church,
to bless *all weddings* performed in our sanctuary.

Maybe we should have held each of these policies up and asked,
do these convey *love* at their core, and do they honor the reputation of God?
As a former Girl Scout, I want to leave this campsite better than the way I found it
when Mindy comes next week.

But no matter how hard I've tried to tidy up, some things keep becoming untidy:
the roof is springing myriads of myriads of leaks,
people keep flocking to our door, repeaters, who bounce in and out of
homes and jobs, no matter how many times we try to help them out,
our 45-year relationship with our Day School is puzzling and unclear,
some of our staff members still are sick or hurting.

But my hope and my prayer is that this beloved community,
soon to be entrusted to Mindy's leadership,
although not necessarily a perfect church or a perfectly-tidy church,
is a church with *self-giving love* at the core of our identity
and with *self-giving love at the core of our practices*, as Jesus has asked of us.

One of the ancient church fathers, a Romanian theologian,
Father Dumitru Staniloae, once said:

"The most shining demonstration of the action of grace (love) within us
is our sympathetic awareness of our neighbor.

By grace (love) we long to make those who are in need at home with us,
as we wish to make God at home with us.

Nothing contributes so much to our growth in righteousness,
to our drawing close to God... as compassion shown to those in need."

(Keller, David. *Desert Banquet*, pp 229-230)

His words bring to mind Jesus being at other meals with tax collectors and sinners,
touching the sick and blind, and reassuring people in society

who have been shamed and marginalized that they have integrity
because they are loved by God.

A little song that my husband keeps humming has become my latest earworm.
It's called "A World Without Love," written in 1964 by Lennon and McCartney,
but made famous by Peter and Gordon, who took it to number 1 in the charts.

*Please lock me away
And don't allow the day
Here inside where I hide
With my loneliness*

***I don't care what they say
I won't stay in a world without love.***

*Birds sing out of tune
And rain clouds hide the moon
I'm OK, here I'll stay
With my loneliness*

***I don't care what they say
I won't stay in a world without love.***

I imagine Reverend William Barber singing this song
after American Airlines had law enforcement remove him
from an airplane last week because of a confrontation with another passenger
that he did not initiate.

At some points in his constant battle for social justice for the underserved,
I'm sure Rev. Barber would just as soon throw up his hands and say,
I don't care what they say, I won't stay in a world without love.

Again, I don't have to stretch my imagination very far
because I *know* from conversations with some of our LGBTQ+ friends,
those in our church and beyond,
that since the North Carolina legislature passed HB2,
a codification of discrimination in North Carolina aimed
directly at them, that they are on the verge of singing the song:

I don't care what they say, I won't stay in a "state" without love.

Lately, I have been spending time providing breakfast and lunch some Mondays for Durham's new StepUp Ministry's jobs training week.

StepUp meets at various locations around the city to provide hands-on job readiness skills, resume writing, interview training, and dress for success advice for those who have been out of the workforce for a while, for those coming out of prison or rehab, or for those who have difficulty finding jobs due to mental health issues or disabilities.

When I walk into StepUp training at 8 a.m., be it at the Holton Resource Center or at the Walltown Community Center or at Blacknall Presbyterian, my arms loaded with a warm, homemade breakfast,

I am shocked each time by what I notice first and foremost:

the posture of the 15-20 persons gathered in the room, mostly men, whose slouch, whose downcast eyes, whose dejected body language speaks volumes to me about not being valued and not having been loved.

And it's not hard for me to imagine them also singing the song:

I don't care what they say, I can't stay in a world without love.

I am fascinated by this little song because *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, Marie Kondo's secular book, suggests that if something ceases to give us joy, we pass it along, toss it, get rid of it.

And by same token, this little Peter and Gordon song suggests that if the world ceases to give us love, show us love, we withdraw, hide away, lock the door, throw away the key, and mope.

The disciples of Jesus had every reason to do just that.

The world of ancient Israel was showing them no love.

It was about to kill their beloved leader and persecute his followers to the ends of the earth.

But what I hear Jesus encouraging them to do, encouraging us to do,

is to stay in a world without love as a public mark of a new community,

to love one another; as he has loved us, to love one another
and by that defiant, countercultural act,
to enhance both the reputation and honor of God
and to embody Jesus' perpetual resurrecting presence in the world.
I think he is advising us—his dearly loved little children, his little church—
to stay in a world without love and *to engage* a world without love,
to be “in the world, but not of the world,” as the Apostle Paul would say,
to be salt and light to a world that is tasteless and dark,
to be the very love that we find deficit in our world.

It is a costly exercise, however. It is neither neat nor tidy. Sorry, Mindy!

It can be quite messy and repetitive, puzzling and unclear.

It may ring our doorbell so many times that we fail to notice
that the church house roof is weeping tears of exhaustion!

It may give us joy in the long-run, or it may not.

Joy is not the defining mark of the Christian community;

Messy, untidy self-giving love is. Sorry, Marie Kondo!

But it will give us Christ, in our midst, our resurrected Lord.

Christ is made present, glory is made manifest,

and resurrection, renewal and redemption of other things happen
through the self-giving love of us, his disciples.

This is the new commandment which Jesus has written on our hearts,

his last and most meaningful words:

love one another; as I have loved you, love one another. Amen.