

## **RUBBISH REMOVAL**

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Philippians 3:4b-14

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For most of us, trash removal is a weekly ritual. It's when we empty the wastebaskets scattered throughout our house into our larger, outdoor trash or garbage can. We might also gather up other miscellaneous items – things that are worn out and broken, and items that are no longer used. For many of us, we then place our large trash can filled with useless stuff at the bottom of our driveway so that it can be emptied and hauled away by the garbage truck. Of course, I realize that some of you may live in places that have dumpsters or shoots, but the principle along with the regular ritual of getting rid of trash is the same.

The fact is, if we do not regularly empty the wastepaper baskets in our homes, they will overflow. If we do not get rid of our kitchen trash in particular, our homes will begin to smell. If we do not throw out broken and worn-out stuff our homes will become cluttered. I've been in homes where it is obvious that those living in them really need to part with some of their accumulated stuff.

My grandmother-in-law, Pheobe, and her home in Pittsburgh was a perfect example. She was a dear woman in many ways, but also a bit eccentric. Whereas she threw out her kitchen garbage and other daily refuse every week, she couldn't seem to part with other stuff. She lived in the basement of a two-story house, and the rooms on the top two floors of her house were filled with newspapers and magazines and aluminum pie plates. There were boxes of dishes, several sets, in fact. There was furniture she no longer used and furniture that was basically never used. She couldn't seem to part with any of it. When she died, the family had to pay for a couple of large industrial dumpsters to haul away a whole lot of useless stuff. Back 25-30 years ago, I don't remember the term "hoarder" being used like it is now, but in our society today, it's clear to me that Grandma Phoebe would solidly fit in the category of a "hoarder."

The fact is, if we don't get rid of some old stuff, useless stuff, broken stuff then stuff can take over our lives, and when that happens there ends up being no room for what is new and useful. Even stuff that still has value sometimes needs to go because we simply no longer need or use it. Of course, some of that stuff which we no longer need can, in the hands of someone else, be useful. A church rummage sale, like the very successful ones we used to have in this church, can be a good opportunity to get rid of that which we no longer need as well as a good opportunity for someone else to acquire that which is needed and useful. Thankfully, there are other organizations like Goodwill and the Salvation Army where we can take the stuff, we no longer need but someone else might find useful. Let's face it, sometimes we hold onto certain things like those things are treasure when those things need to be categorized as trash because they are cluttering our lives, distracting us, weighing us down, and preventing us from making good choices, moving forward, and opening ourselves to something new.

The Apostle Paul understood well the practice of discarding old stuff for the purpose of moving ahead, making room for something new, and ultimately being more faithful to the call of Jesus. He referred to the discarded stuff as **"rubbish"** (Phil. 3:8). Paul threw out a lot of what he called "rubbish" to make more room for a life of faith in Christ. Much of what he threw out was stuff that had been valuable to him for many years; it was quality stuff that had served him well and set him apart as special, as one to be respected. He wrote to his friends in faith in the city of Philippi, saying, **"If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless"** (Phil. 3:4b-6). He was basically saying that if he were to enter a bragging contest, he would likely win. Not necessarily for what he possessed for he was not a wealthy man, but for who he was. His Jewish identity, genealogy, family tree, connections, standing in the community, as well as his knowledge and obeying of God's word were about as good as it got when it came to bragging rights qualities. Paul is not a man who was embarrassed by his background, education and family connections. His heritage, knowledge, achievements and zeal were considered great stuff by most people in those days. And yet, Paul decided he needed to dispose of a lot of that good stuff, because it was preventing him from being and doing what Jesus was calling him to be and do.

Why would Paul throw away what he had just described as good?

**"Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ... I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ..."** (Phil. 3:7-8). With these words, Paul shares his belief that one cannot claim to be a follower of Jesus and still be concerned about the same old things of the past like looking good and moving up. We cannot keep our same old priorities and agenda, hold tightly to our pride, prioritize daily our own investments and preferences, and just add in some faith here and there when it happens to fit. Paul was convinced that following Jesus was not possible if faith was something we simply tacked on around the outside edges of our life. How can we possibly keep our lives intact when this faith that we profess is about One who gave up the glory of heaven to be a servant among us, and who then willingly sacrificed and died for us?

Paul was convinced that he and everyone who professed to be a Christian should be as much like Jesus as possible. So, if that's the case, then what do you do with things like greed, anger, envy and pride? What do you do with self-centeredness and your insistence on independence and being self-made? What do you do with your own agenda, your calendar of activities to which you may or may not add a little worship, service, and sacrifice? If you ask Paul, he would tell you that **much of the stuff you consider important to who you are in this life is more likely "rubbish" that needs to be discarded so that you can be more like Jesus.**

Paul would tell you something like that, because it's not just what he thought, it's what he did. Paul threw out the old rules that said he was better than others and that only allowed him to eat and associate with other Jewish born and rule-abiding people of faith. He discarded the old work rules that prevented him from helping others on the Sabbath. He discarded the old rules that defined clean and unclean and gave him an excuse to avoid caring for and serving certain other people. He got rid of the old attitude that justified his disdain and persecution of those who didn't think and believe like he did. And after filling a dumpster with all the stuff that was no longer of any use to him, he then took what was still useful and he did some dramatic repurposing. The power of God's love as it was embodied in Jesus changed Paul's perspective of most everything, and that change allowed him to repurpose his strengths and abilities in ways that allowed him to become an impactful follower of Jesus Christ.

So even though Paul drastically changed his behavior of zealously persecuting Christians, he still used his knowledge of scripture and his passionate nature to teach and preach Jesus Christ. His articulate skills in public speaking – skills learned and used before he was confronted by Jesus on the road to Damascus and converted, and were also very useful. His passion and zeal and knowledge were still very much a part of him, but they were redirected. It takes great faith to not only let go of that which is no longer useful but to also save that which is salvageable so that it may be repurposed into something new and useful.

**For Christians, Lent is that time of the year when we focus on the necessity of "removing rubbish" from our lives, and repurposing and redirecting that which is worth keeping.** Of course, we need to get rid of stuff throughout the entire year, but these six weeks are particularly meant for us to review our priorities and actions, and to concentrate on the condition of our heart, soul and mind. We know or at least we should know that old, sin-ridden thoughts, actions, priorities need to be disposed of so that we can make room for the new attitude and greater purpose to which God is calling us. Whether it's old resentment, anger and bitterness, or old prejudice, selfishness and hurtful habits. These are the things that prevent us from whole-heartedly following Jesus Christ and being more fully impacted by the power of resurrection life. There are always going to be old things that seem valuable, that are certainly familiar and comfortable, and yet, they are of no value when it comes to being more like Jesus. Removing the rubbish of old attitudes, habits, and actions is never easy, but doing so allows for transformative possibilities that bless the lives of others and further God's Kingdom on earth. Now, during Lent, is the time to seriously consider such things.

Do you happen to have the ability to teach, to organize, to offer hospitality, to work with children, to visit the elderly, to care for the sick, to work with your hands, or to repair and build? Maybe you have a passion for art, music, sports, cooking, nature or justice. These are things you may be using and enjoying, but in their present form they are doing little to reveal and further the Kingdom of God. The resurrection power of Jesus Christ can help you repurpose and redirect your interests, skills and passions into forms that impact others in ways that

honor God's call in your life. As a congregation, we might need to discard some of those old thoughts about what the church should be and do, so that we can more clearly see and do what God wants to do among us and with us right now.

By using himself as an example, Paul encourages us to reorder our priorities, to throw out what is not helpful to Christian discipleship, and to always be looking to the One who has gone before us. In many ways, Paul was a very unusual man who more passionately than most believed that being like Jesus was an ideal to seek and achieve. **Paul took to heart that Jesus followers should love, and care, and give, and serve, and suffer, and sacrifice like Jesus did.** "I am not there yet," said Paul. "I don't want you to get the idea that I have arrived and attained my goal. I have not, but I'll tell you this, being like Jesus is the main thing on my mind. And with temples pounding, heart pumping, muscles aching, body sweating, I'm running toward that one goal of being like Jesus" (paraphrase of Phil. 3:12-14).

You may never in your lifetime meet anybody who takes Jesus as seriously as Paul. But just in case some of you here today also take Jesus seriously and others of you are thinking you should take Jesus more seriously, perhaps we really ought to consider the "rubbish" that needs removed. If we do, then we might also join Paul in saying, ***"Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus"*** (Phil. 3:14). May this be our goal not only during Lent, but throughout the year and for our lifetimes! Amen.