

When Dreams Become Nightmares

John 10:10-15

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Centennial United Methodist Church

Linda Loessberg-Zahl

Recently, I went to see our son, Aaron for a couple of days. I had to take my stuff. I really don't like packing for any trip, because I don't like having to decide what to take. As soon as I walked through the door Aaron said, "You brought a whole suitcase?"

I have a lot of stuff. How about you? Comedian George Carlin said, "If you didn't have so much stuff, you wouldn't need a house. You could just walk around all the time. A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. You can see that when you're taking off in an airplane. You look down, you see everybody's got a little pile of stuff....And when you leave your house, you gotta lock it up. Wouldn't want somebody to come by and take some of your stuff. They always take the good stuff." There are new gadgets that can help us hide our good stuff. Look what I found.



Hidden storage bathroom tiles, fake electrical outlets, sham books on a bookshelf and even a hidden air vent vault. As I was looking at all of these I started to think, "Hey, I should buy a couple of these!" Then I caught myself, "Wait a minute!" All of this stuff is very seductive. We even buy bigger houses because we need more space for all our stuff. Now, material things are not bad in themselves. People have always had some kind of objects. Even early civilizations had handmade tools, baskets, jewelry. The problem comes when the stuff takes over our lives and makes us sick.

We've been taught about the American Dream. There are high ideals around one version of the American Dream: equality, freedom, new beginnings. But generally people mean something else when they talk about the American Dream. For most people it's tangled up with an image of success and a subconscious desire for material possessions, more and bigger stuff. We come to define our time, our effort and ourselves by how much stuff we own.

This sermon is not about judging others. Jesus in Matthew 7:1,2 cautions us: "Do not judge that you may not be judged." This is about looking at ourselves and what is keeping us from greater joy and contentment in our own lives. This distorted version of the American Dream makes us sick. Let me show you what I mean. Americans spend an average of six hours a week shopping and 40 minutes playing with our children (From Imprint, 11-29-96). No one is immune. Where are you stressed by finances or economic security? This American Dream is more like a nightmare with two related diseases: Affluenza and Credit-itis.

A Public Broadcasting Station defined Affluenza as 1. The bloated, sluggish and unfulfilled feeling that results from efforts to keep up with the Joneses. 2. An epidemic of stress, overwork, waste and indebtedness caused by the pursuit of the American Dream. 3. An unsustainable addiction to economic growth. Everywhere we look an ad or commercial is trying to convince us we "need" to buy something. Most of us at some time have struggled with this virus. We each probably have something on a wish list, something we hope to replace or purchase: clothes, furniture, a car. In fact, a whole industry has grown out of our desire for more stuff. What doesn't fit in our house we put -- in storage! The whole storage industry has sprung up because we have so much stuff! (Early settlers didn't need storage units! Jesus didn't use a safety deposit box!)

Last year the total self storage rentable space in the US was 2.3 billion square feet (according to the Self Storage Association, <http://www.selfstorage.org>).

The second disease is closely related. It's called credit-itis, the lure to buy now and pay later. These last four years have shown us how deadly this disease can be, as individuals and whole institutions have fallen like a fragile house of cards. Skyrocketing credit card balances, unsecured home loans and greedy bank practices have left a lot of people and this country very ill. In the 1950's families had almost no debt. In 1980 household debt was 68% of disposable income. According to the U.S. Federal Reserve, after a peak in 2007, today on average people owe 112% of their disposable income. Americans owe more than we can pay. Dr. Craig Gay (a professor at Regent University and lecturer on Christianity and Culture) makes this stunning observation: "The most serious indictment we must level at contemporary consumer behavior is that it is 'spiritless'. It betrays a decision to sacrifice all noble and truly human aspirations at the altars of comfort, convenience, and safety." We could also add pleasure to that list.

This is not just an economic issue or financial issue. It's a spiritual issue. Too much of our efforts go to pursuing the American Dream promoted by our culture, preventing us from nurturing God's gifts and purpose in our lives. In Mark 8:36 Jesus puts it this way, "What does it profit a person to gain the whole world and lose their soul?"

It's not about the valuables that we lock up in those hidden, secret places in our house, but about what is most precious in the depths of our hearts. Jesus knows what we really want. Jesus knows what is most precious. In John 10:10-15 Jesus says, "A thief comes only to rob, kill, and destroy. I came so that everyone would have life, and have it in abundance." God wants to give us what we most want and need, an abundant life. Not an abundance of stuff, stress and struggle,

but an abundance of love, an oversupply of hope, the fullness of life. The word we translate as *abundance* is from the Greek word *perissos*, which means *more, greater, exceedingly*. God will exceed your expectations if you open your heart, your true self, your very soul to God. Don't let anyone steal or destroy the joy God wants for you in life. Every day I lock my house and my car, but I am not as good at protecting my heart. Too often we let our truest self and our priorities get high jacked by external influences that encourage selfishness, greed and envy. Those influences steal the joy and peace God has given us in simple pleasures and love. God is able to help us find true security and contentment. Like a good shepherd, God wants to protect us, leading us away from dangerous paths, keeping us from getting stranded alone.

Let God protect and heal your heart. Try beginning each day with a prayer. Ask God, "Help me be the person you created me to be today. Heal and protect my heart from those desires that lead to struggle and stress, and keep me on the path that leads to you."

I don't mean we should never buy anything, but God doesn't want bad priorities and self-centered desires to steal our joy or undermine our true purpose. I'm sure you have had experiences that remind you of what is most important, that remind you that you are a child of God, called to love and serve God, by loving others. As our family is walking through this time of our son's illness it is so clear what is important and precious in our lives. I'm sure you've had experiences that clarify that for you too.

Let this be a clarifying moment. Let God help you discover the divine richness in your life, like the Delgado family did. Sixty-year-old Perfecta Delgado had a clarifying moment when her family was burned out of their rundown apartment right before Christmas. Lee Strobel was a

journalist for the Chicago Tribune when he met The Delgado's in a tiny two-bedroom apartment where they now live.

“As I walked in, I couldn't believe how empty it was. There was no furniture, no rugs, nothing on the walls—only a small kitchen table and one handful of rice. That's it. They were virtually devoid of possessions. In fact, 11-year-old Lydia and 13-year-old Jenny owned only one short-sleeved dress each, plus one thin, gray sweater between them. When they walked the half-mile to school through the biting cold, Lydia would wear the sweater for part of the distance and then hand it to her shivering sister, who would wear it the rest of the way. But despite their poverty and the painful arthritis that kept Perfecta from working, she still talked confidently about her faith in Jesus. She was convinced he had not abandoned them. I never sensed despair or self-pity in her home; instead, there was a gentle feeling of hope and peace.”

Strobel finished his article and went on to more high-profile subjects. He thought about the family again on Christmas Eve and stopped by to see how they were doing. People had read his article and responded with overwhelming generosity. The apartment was full of furniture, appliances, food, warm clothes, a Christmas tree, and presents.

“As surprised as I was by this outpouring, I was even more astonished by what my visit was interrupting: Perfecta and her granddaughters were getting ready to give away much of their newfound wealth. When I asked Perfecta why, she (answered), ‘Our neighbors are still in need. We cannot have plenty while they have nothing. This is what Jesus would want us to do.’ That blew me away! If I had been in their position at that time in my life, I would have been hoarding everything. I asked Perfecta what she thought about the generosity of the

people who had sent all of these goodies, and again her response amazed me. ‘This is wonderful; this is very good,’ she said, gesturing toward (all that had been given). ‘We did nothing to deserve this—it’s a gift from God. But,’ she added, ‘it is not his greatest gift. No, we celebrate that tomorrow. That is Jesus.’”

Notice how simple it is to Perfecta! She knows that our whole lives are a gift from God, and that love of God in Christ is the greatest. When we open our hearts to that love every day, we begin to pursue *God's Dream*, the Kingdom of God, and we find a greater purpose: a call to simplicity, to faithfulness and the power of generosity. We see how we can make a difference with the resources and gifts we've been given and we discover the kind of joy experienced by Perfecta and her family. Rev. Adam Hamilton offers four guidelines for finding that joy and freedom:

- simplify our lives and silence the voices constantly telling us we need more
- live counter-culturally by living below, not above, our means
- build into our budgets the money to buy with cash instead of credit
- build into our budgets what we need to be able to live generously and faithfully

In the weeks ahead we'll talk more about how to simplify our complicated lives, how to enjoy what we have and how to handle our money and possessions with God's purpose. This is a journey to joy, generosity and abundance. Let's go together. Let God exceed your expectations! Amen.

(Thanks to Adam Hamilton's *Enough - Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity*, for the context of this sermon.)