

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, CT 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: January 23, 2011
Sermon Title: Do I Really Need This?
Scripture: Luke 10:1-9
Pastor: Alida Ward

I can't just launch into this sermon without a prologue first, a prologue of gratitude, of thanks for which I really have no words. Last Saturday was, for David and me, a day of pure magic – a day of absolutely blissful happiness, and the reason was all of you. Coming down the aisle after our wedding to see your faces of love was an extraordinary experience, a gift of grace, a time of complete blessing. So for that we thank you, we thank you, we thank you. I also discovered, after a lifetime of being a pretty practical woman and definitely a feminist, that deep within I actually did have a deep-seeded yearning to be a princess for a day, so I have to personally thank you for treating me like one. Taking off my little tiara thingie at the end of the day was a very sad moment, and in fact it was hard to resist the urge to wear it again today.

And now, having consumed personally the very last crumb of wedding cake, we're on to the more pragmatic aspects of marriage, which for us is the task of combining two households, or to be specific, me and Andres traipsing across the street with all our stuff. Brigitta being off at college gets to miss all these less glamorous moments. And it's all that STUFF that we're traipsing with that I want to focus on. The truth is, I have led a very sheltered life, in that I have never really had to move. I arrived at Greenfield Hill straight out of seminary, owning next to nothing. A small UHaul truck took care of our meagre possessions at that time. This task I am now in the midst of, sorting through a couple decades worth of acquisition, is something very new for me – I realize I am looking out at the faces of people who have moved many a time, so yes, I do feel a little silly saying to you that gosh, this is kind of hard, but gosh, it kind of is. I don't mind picking up boxes and hauling them around – I've been lifting down at the gym, I prepped for this. It's what you put IN the boxes that is an unexpected challenge to me. It's that question you have to ask of every single item: *Do I Really Need You?* Everything you pick up has to be weighed in the balance: keep it? junk it? I had no idea this process would involve so much thought. Some things, of course, are easy. I need my little file cabinet that has passports and birth certificates and every report card ever given to one of my children. I need the Bible that has been mine since eighth grade Confirmation class. Conversely, I do NOT need the really dirty, I would even say moldy, pair

of flip-flops found in the back of my closet. I do NOT need the box of blueberry muffin mix from 2007 which I unearthed this week – honestly, it seemed like only yesterday that I had the thought to bake breakfast for my family. Those decisions are easy, the obvious treasures, the obvious junk. But then there is this vast amorphous gray area: Should they stay or should they go?

I brought some of the occupants of that gray area with me, the things I puzzled over yesterday: A coffee mug, plastic, doesn't hold heat at all, real cheap, from our 2002 trip to Disneyworld. Keep? Toss? And this – it's a little book that you keep track of people's birthdays in. It was given to me in eighth grade. I honestly don't remember a number of the people in here, but there are some memorables ones: March 9. Jeff Lamp. Starting forward for the University of Virginia Basketball Team in 1978, wore number three, and I thought he walked on water. Am I allowed to say that in the pulpit? And August 20 – my beloved Uncle Bob, born in 1940, it says, but who lived only to 1989. I loved that guy. So, keep this book? Don't really need it, right? Toss? And then there's this Teletubby. I believe this is La-La – there was also Dipsy, TinkyWinky and Po. Which would seem almost a no-brainer – surely a toss. But this is the stuffed friend that Brigitta clutched throughout her hospital stay for a week when she was six, when she was rushed to the hospital with a malady that only our Dr. Tom Kennedy managed to figure out. Laa-Laa actually accompanied her into her CAT scans, and we in fact have a CAT scan OF Laa-Laa, because only by having her – him? – it? go first could the technicians get Brigitta to. So do I need this Teletubby? No ... yes.... What you realize is that there's need and there's need. There's practicality and there's memory and laughter and love and joy too. What do you really need? Well, both, I think.

Jesus spent a lot of time talking to his followers about what you really need. He was pretty clear that he probably don't need a lot of stuff. Pretty clear. This is, after all, the man who said to his anxious disciples, "why do you worry so much about having food and clothing?" "Consider the lilies of the field – they don't do a lick of work, but they are clothed by God more beautifully than King Solomon in all his splendor ever was. So don't worry about not having stuff -- God will provide to you as God provided to the lilies." And then there was the parable he told about the Rich Fool who spent his life accumulating stuff, had to build bigger and bigger warehouses for stuff, and then died in his sleep one night only to encounter God in heaven saying, essentially, "hey, buddy, what was really the point of all that? Jesus was forever telling people to get rid of their possessions, come with him; sell their goods, come with him; give it all up, come along with him. And in the passage that Lori just read, he says to a whole lot of people, seventy in fact, "All right – I'm sending you out now to be my messengers, I want you to go to every village out there and tell them about God's love, I want you to heal and preach ... but here's the thing – don't take anything with you. Carry no purse, no bag, not even sandals. Just go as you are." Jesus was all about traveling light. Really, really light. No stuff, no bags, not even shoes.

But that said, there were a lot of things he *did* want people to carry. He wanted them to carry faith with them. He wanted them to believe and to trust. He wanted them to be bearers of love and healing. There was plenty he wanted them to keep, to take, to carry, to pack. Just not a whole lotta stuff.

About 15 years ago, actually probably more, we had a guest in this church, a pretty unusual one. I'm not absolutely sure I'm even remembering his name right, but I think it was Al Anderson. Al was walking – by himself – from Maine to Florida, stopping at churches along the way to talk about peace and talk about faith and trust. He was carrying almost nothing with him. He got rides where he could, and walked the rest of the way, believing and trusting that he'd be cared for, and eager to talk about Christ's love wherever he went. So he stayed with us for a night, and part of me didn't know what to think of him, but the rest of me felt profound admiration and even envy. He knew exactly what to pack with him – utter faith and trust, deep love and compassion – the guy was really, really sweet – and an absolute commitment to the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of peace. He was definitely traveling light in the material things department - - but he had a big bag full of faith, hope and love.

I've been thinking about all of this because it's been occurring to me – in between dumping muffin mix and pondering Teletubbies – that this whole sorting, organizing, moving process I'm in is really just one big illustration of what the life of faith is all about, what it means to live a faithful life, a God-focused life, a good life.

It's really all about looking at everything you're carrying, everything you're storing, stashing, filling up closets with and saying *Do I really need this?* I don't just mean material stuff. I mean, sure, yes, material stuff counts – Jesus was pretty darn clear that he wasn't a big fan of having lots of stuff – pretty clear that in fact it is not about whoever dies with the most toys wins. Quite the opposite.

So, yes, a faithful life does include looking at stuff and thinking about purchases before they happen and saying is this right for me, for us, is this needed, will there be some good to this, is there a need? As the head of a household possessing an Xbox, a Wii, a Gamecube, and something else, I cannot claim personally to be on the side of the angels here – but I do know those are the questions to be asked when it comes to stuff. So yes, material stuff is part of the issue.

But what I really mean is something bigger. I mean looking at what you've stored up in the storerooms of your heart, in the closets of your soul, as it were. I mean looking at all that you're toting around in your mind, in your heart, in your hurts and saying *wait – do I really need this? Might I possibly be better off without this? Is it perhaps time to toss this one out?*

If you look in the backs of your closets, I mean your soul closets, your heart, I'm guessing there's a LOT of junk. I'm guessing there are some resentments that you could scrap, some old angers that are serving no purpose. I'm guessing there are some grudges that are taking up a lot of room. I would also bet that there are fears that you really need to toss in the dumpster at this point – fears that are doing you no good at all. I would bet you've got some really unnecessary self-doubt and quite possibly some self-image stuff that should be scrapped. And I imagine there are things that you would love to be rid of, if only you could forgive yourself for them – mistakes, stupidities, hurts, cruelties. Those you really need to get rid of – especially since God has long since forgiven you for them.

All of that stuff you don't need. It is definitely in the dirty moldy flip-flops in the back of the closet category. Dump it. Dump it all. You don't need it.

What you need is the good stuff.

I told you that I know I need my eighth grade Bible. (*right here*) Which is to say really that I know I need my faith. I know I need to hear the story of a God who loves me, I know I need that strength. I know I need faith. But I also need, and so do you, the things that my other stuff represents, birthday book and Disney mug and even the Teletubby: that is to say, I need memories of joy, and moments of blessing, healing remembered and felt still, love and hope and tenderness. Trust and compassion and assurance – all the things that Jesus carried, the things he told his friends to carry. That's what I need, that's what you need.

The other day, Thursday it was, I watched as Ann Curry on NBC interviewed, the Burmese woman who won the Nobel Peace Prize for her tireless and nonviolent work on behalf of the people of now Myanmar. She has spent 15 out of the past 21 years under house arrest, at present out on release, but who knows how long it will last. She is a woman of extraordinary gentleness, compassion and even laughter. And watching her speak, it struck me all the things that she has decided she doesn't need, doesn't need to keep in her closets, doesn't need to carry. She doesn't hold on to anger – which is astonishing to me. She has no desire for revenge – her desire, she said, is to sit and speak with the people who have jailed her – because we have to talk, she said, in order to find peaceful change. And she has no fear. “The only real prison,” she said simply, “IS fear.” She doesn't carry it with her.

What she does have is what you really need. Utter faith: a belief, she said, in the power of compassion and the true goodness of humanity. She has dreams – the dream of freedom is something you can never give up, she said, never. And she has that lightness of spirit that comes only from someone who has ultimate trust is something much bigger than herself. She has figured out what she needs to hold onto, and I was moved to tears by her laughter and lightness, her

joy and her hope. She knows what she really needs – and it so happens it's what we all really need.

So I invite you to clean closets. Not literally necessarily, but you're certainly welcome at my place. I mean clean out what you're holding onto that you don't need and find what you do. Go through every bit of what's hiding in your spirit and ask yourself "do I really need you?" What you don't, get rid of. And what you cherish, hold onto, strengthen, pay attention to.

Travel light. Go in faith. Live in hope.
Amen.