

February 8th: The Heavenly Kingdom

Welcome friends, to our series called Kingdom Economics–this is a series that we put together to combine our annual Stewardship Campaign with the conversations that our Social Justice Book Group has been having surrounding faith and economic justice. That means that over the seven weeks, we’re learning about all things related to money, resources, and how to build a better community using those gifts. The Bible has a lot to say about these topics, because God is fundamentally interested in a more equitable world, and we get to be a part of that important work. So if one of your New Year's resolutions is to work on a better relationship with money, or you’re unsure of how to use what you already have–this is the series for you.

Before we dive in, let’s prepare our hearts and minds with prayer.

Heavenly Father, each week, we pray that your will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. We hold out hope that your peace and justice will reign in our world as it does in eternity, we trust that there is a time when all of our cries and suffering here will cease. This morning we remember that you call us to live both in our current communities and in the future reality of your kingdom–so we look to you for inspiration and encouragement. Speak to us, draw near to us, and lead us into this glorious promise we pray. Amen.

In 2010, when Marie Kondo’s bestseller, “The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up” hit shelves, she launched a revolution: all of a sudden, people around the globe were trying her KonMari method of decluttering items that no longer “spark joy” in their daily lives. She advocated for a giant overhaul of one’s personal belongings, removing anything and everything that added unnecessary visual and mental weight to our homes and lives. It was extreme, and it was a phenomenon.

But now, there’s a new trend in the world of organizing–it’s called Swedish Death Cleaning. If you haven’t heard of Swedish Death Cleaning before, here’s what it involves: as couples and individuals enter the final third of their lives,

they start to slowly remove extraneous items from their home, choosing to keep only what is absolutely required for daily needs. It emphasizes storing memories instead of storing mementos, and prepares for the future by limiting the number of belongings that will need to be sorted through, shared, or disposed of after one's life has come to an end. To some people, this process might sound pretty morbid, but to others, Swedish Death Cleaning is a tangible way that they choose to reduce the burden on the next generation. By getting rid of objects in advance, participants in Swedish Death Cleaning ensure that they can focus on quality time with loved ones, rather than forcing their children or other family members to deal with complicated logistics after their passing.

Whatever method resonates with you, both of these processes offer individuals and families a way to sort through what we've intentionally or unintentionally accumulated. And the reality is, Americans in general have way more stuff than we need. Even as our homes have gotten bigger over the years, our spaces have become more and more dominated by gadgets, clutter, and sentimental items that we keep because we don't know what else to do with them. This abundance of stuff has created whole new industries, like the self storage industry, which as of 2025 was valued at \$44.3 billion dollars. One study determined that just over 11% of American households currently rent some kind of storage unit, at an average cost of \$85.30 per month.¹ We have so much stuff we are literally paying other people to store it.

But you might be asking, what does this have to do with our personal faith? Why is this relevant to our spirituality? Well, it's not that there's an exact number of items that God says it's okay to own, and there's nothing inherently wrong or immoral about buying things that do bring us joy or utility, but this obsession with stuff, always more stuff, is a mindset that I don't think serves us. If what we own ends up owning us, that doesn't get us closer to the world that God envisioned for us.

¹ <https://www.sparefoot.com/blog/self-storage-industry-statistics>

So let's take a closer look at how we might see things differently—what it might look like to be in God's upside down, jubilee, generous, communal, and heavenly kingdom.

Our scripture passage for today takes us to the Gospel of Luke, and a series of conversations between Jesus and his disciples. In this part of Luke's Gospel, Jesus has started to draw large crowds when he teaches in public, and these crowds often contain other spiritual leaders or authorities who challenge him or try to provoke him. Sometimes, these crowds treat his lectures like a courtroom—bringing him their petty disputes and conflicts—and that's what we see starting in verse 13. Our text begins this way: "Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?"

In this case, Jesus offers this piece of advice, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." That seems like pretty simple wisdom, but Jesus doesn't stop there—he continues with this parable—a way of teaching to help his audience and us think differently: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."' "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' Jesus ends this section of his sermon by saying, "This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."

Let's break this down. This story introduces us to an unnamed man, who Jesus describes as rich with an abundant harvest. Because he has so much surplus, he imagines that he will need to tear down his barns and build bigger ones—that's his solution to this problem of having too much. And this rich man, once he figures out how to store all of his extra grain, tells himself that this will ensure that he can live an easy life for many years—he plans to party away

while others labor. Never once did he consider other solutions for this abundant harvest, and never once does he consider that his current barns are sufficient for what he actually needs. And this tendency towards selfishness and resource hoarding results in a direct challenge from God: if tonight was the end of his life, what would he really have? What does he possess that really matters?

This parable is similar to a story from Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus uses a portion of the Sermon on the Mount to preach about this topic of the heavenly kingdom. In that passage, he says, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Now, hear me clearly: I don't think the purpose of this parable or Jesus' sermon is for us to judge this unnamed, fictional man. Even though it would be so easy for us to critique his behavior and scoff at his poor decisions, that's not the point. He's not a villain we can all point at and distance ourselves from. In fact, the whole purpose of the parable is to invite us to place ourselves in the man's shoes—to acknowledge our own warped perspectives and selfish desires. This is a chance to honestly evaluate our own tendencies towards resource hoarding—because that desire to stockpile for ourselves is inside all of our hearts. We all have our own versions of "storing up grain" or "building bigger barns," or finding comfort in purchasing more and more stuff. I'm not excluded from that—I own more sweaters than I need, I have more books than I have the time to read, and I still search for the next thing to buy that I hope will make me feel safe and whole.

But these passages tell me that it doesn't have to be this way—and it won't be that way in God's Kingdom. God's heavenly kingdom isn't about individual stockpiles and protecting ourselves from life's challenges so that we can throw a party. God's heavenly kingdom invites us to remember what is truly important: our relationships with loved ones, building community, caring for

the least of these, and finding meaning in our daily lives. That's what gives us purpose. That's what fills our souls with joy. That's what inspires us to transform our broken world. That's the impact we all want to make and the legacy we want to build. That's what we want to pass down to the next generation.

Speaking of the next generation, I think there's a reason to be hopeful. Believe it or not, a number of Millennials, Gen Z and Gen Alpha are already on board with this. They're already thinking about what's most important in their lives and stepping away from consumerism and the temptation to hoard resources. They're trying to prevent accumulating too many things in the first place, so that they never have to do a whirlwind Marie Kondo method or Swedish Death Cleaning.

How do I know this? I've been seeing it all over social media! Instagram and TikTok in particular are home to a lot of new content related to a movement that some commentators are calling "the rich in life" trend. Basically, this trend redefines wealth beyond money or physical resources, choosing instead to focus on smaller luxuries or intangible things that bring value to our lives. Let's take a look at a few examples.

This first one says, "rich in life because I enjoy the little things." Next, we have "rich in life because I have the most amazing and loving friends." Oh I love this one, it says, "rich in life because I gave myself a second chance." I can't relate to this one but maybe one of you can, it reads, "rich in life because I still get to spend time with my grandparents."

Here's a few more, just more simple: "I am rich in time." "I am rich in gratitude." "I am rich in health."

It might seem silly, but I think this type of media is actually pretty important—and even a little countercultural. When our society tells us that wealth is measured in dollars or stock market positions or number of possessions, it's pretty radical to say that true wealth is something different. It

becomes rebellious to declare that our happiness comes from relationships and community service rather than items we can buy on Amazon. Our current system depends on all of us buying more and more, hoarding resources, renting more space, never having enough—but we can put a stop to that message when we claim that none of those earthly metrics matter. When we say “we have enough,” we speak out against an economy that’s only goal is to bankrupt us. When we determine that we are “rich in life” by God’s standards, we give rise to God’s heavenly economy. Then, we get to see the fullness of God’s heavenly kingdom come into being.

Here’s what I want us to think about this week, as we navigate all of this cultural messaging and these words that we’ve heard from Jesus:

First, ask yourself: what really matters to me? When I look back on my life or when I imagine the future, what stands out as my highest values and priorities? Are my actions and choices aligned with these values and priorities, or do I need to make a change?

Second, challenge yourself: is the stuff that you own, owning you? Are you getting caught up in the same thinking as the man storing up grain? Are you hoarding instead of sharing? If so, what could you do this week to detach from those items or mindsets and find a different path?

And third, don’t wait to reflect on these questions. Truly, none of us know what is in store for our future. We never know when our fragile human lives will come to an end. We have a limited amount of time on this earth, and we don’t want to waste a second of it.

My friends, God’s heavenly Kingdom reminds us that this earthly world is a pale imitation of what is possible. Our current reality is no match for our promised future—a kingdom where there is more than enough for everyone. Instead of getting caught up in what doesn’t matter, let’s keep our eyes focused on what is coming into being. Let’s stay attuned to the ways that we are

already rich, so that we might live our lives to their fullest potential. Let's remember that we belong to something eternal.

Amen.