

Seeking and Finding

Sermon 31 | Greystone Baptist Church | September 22, 2019

Luke 15: 1-10

In 2014 Marie Kondo's best-selling book, *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, hit shelves in the United States. It quickly topped best-seller lists and ultimately landed Marie Kondo on *TIME* magazine's list of "100 Most Influential People". Kondo's success didn't stop there, early this year, her Netflix series, *Tidying up with Marie Kondo*, got her nominated for the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Host for a reality or Competition Program.

I have to confess, I read the book in 2016 and watched the Netflix series when it aired earlier this year. While neither struck me as particularly entertaining, there was a depth and profound (sometimes even) spiritual truth to the Konmari method that kept my attention. Rather than focusing on what we need to discard (as is the case with most organizational strategies), the Konmari method invites us to consider the one question as we go about decluttering: *does this spark joy?*

The book leads its reader through a step by step process, during which they touch everything in their home – from clothes, to books, to memorabilia, to family heirlooms – and as they touch each item they decide whether or not it sparks joy. If it does, they keep it. If it does not, they give thanks for what the item used to mean and then set it in a pile to give away. If you are like me, the idea of going through my home piece by piece, and trying to decide whether each and every little thing gives me joy seems like a daunting task. But Marie Kondo has a strategy for that. Take your time, she says. Some people spend a week on each step. Some people take a year to go through the process. Little by little, as we recover the items we really want and need in our lives – joy rushes in.

Behind all the magic of tidying lies a belief that all the stuff we accumulate crowds out the joy of what really matters in life. Tidying our homes the konmari way is just another way to rediscover joy.

After reading the book, I was eager to watch the Netflix series especially because I wanted to see how this new philosophy would work in American households. Everything about it seemed counter to our culture which reinforces the values of unbridled consumerism and conspicuous consumption, We accumulate stuff better than anyone else. Toys for our kids, clothes for all four seasons, shoes for every occasion, items inherited from parents' and grandparents' homes... we have more stuff than we know what to do with... and yet we cannot seem to find joy.

Americans have, in fact, been steadily declining in happiness since the 1970s, according to the Washington Post and General Social Survey.¹ We are uncertain about our future, our safety, our job security and so we are increasingly becoming an uneasy and unhappy

bunch. It might be easy for us to sound like the Pharisees and scribes we meet in Luke, chapter 15.

They come to Jesus “grumbling,” Luke tells us, because Jesus is welcoming sinners... and eating with them too! It is in response to that grumbling that we find these parables from today’s reading...parables about losing, seeking, and finding.

Which of you, having one hundred sheep loses one of them and leaves the 99 behind to go and find the one which was lost? Which of you would do that?

And what woman, having ten silver coins, after losing one would search her whole house until the coin that was lost was once again found? Who would do that?

As modern readers, it is our tendency to imagine ourselves as that which is lost... the sheep, the coin... and we imagine God to be the shepherd who leaves everything behind to come and find us. We think of God as the woman who overturns everything in her house, until we are found. God may indeed seek us out, find us, and rescue us from time to time; but I’m not sure that’s what this parable is about.

“Which of you,” Jesus says to those who were grumbling, which of you, having lost something important, would go and search until you found it? And wouldn’t you rejoice once it was found?

Scholars believe that those who were listening to Jesus that day probably could relate to the shepherds and the woman. They were most likely relatively wealthy and therefore they knew what it would be like to own 100 sheep and to have ten silver coins. They would easily identify with the shepherd and the woman as people who had enough... more than enough, in fact.

And yet they grumble.

It seems they’ve lost more than a coin or a sheep. It seems they have lost their joy.

When Marie Kondo’s show was released on Netflix, I found myself identifying with the homeowners. Too much stuff, more than enough, actually. Not enough space. Too much clutter and worst of all... too little joy. Kondo went into homes of all kinds of Americans with a wide range of space and budget. But time after time, she found families that were grumbling. They were unhappy. It seems the more we have, the grumblier we become. We have everything we could ever want and yet we’ve lost the one thing that brings us joy.

I grumble sometimes.

I get a little grumbly when the house is a mess and the dishes aren’t done.

I grumble sometimes when there’s too much to do and not enough time.

I grumble sometimes when I'm not tending to my family, to my friends, and to the people God has placed in my life.

I grumble and lose sight of the things that matter the most... the things that truly bring me joy.

It's easy to do, when we have 100 sheep and 10 silver coins. These are the things that the world tells us we need. A big house in the best neighborhood. A membership at the best social club. The best schools for our children. A vacation home, a college fund and healthy retirement accounts.

It's easy to lose sight of that which matters most when we're busy working endless hours to afford our lifestyles, to keep up appearances, to make sure our friends know we are successful, that we've got it all together and that our real lives look as impressive as the pictures we post on our social media accounts and celebrate in our Christmas letters.

It's easy to lose that one little sheep when we've got 99 over here, grumbling and demanding our attention.

We've been reading parables for a few weeks now and each week we have seen how ordinary characters behave in extraordinary ways. The simplest seed expands into the largest tree. The gardener displays unprecedented grace, insisting the weeds be allowed to grow alongside the wheat. And here a shepherd turns his back on the flock and a woman sets aside 9 coins in order to seek after the one sheep and the one coin that they lost along the way.

What have we lost while we've been focusing on all that we are accumulating?

These Sinners – The Shepherd and the woman – they turned from their ways of tending to the masses in order to focus on the one that they had lost. And Jesus credits this turning away from the many to go after the one as an act of repentance!

The Greek word metanoia is translated as the verb "to repent." More fully, it describes a pivot, a turning away from, a new direction, and a new priority. To repent is to change one's mind and to change one's focus.

A good shepherd in Jesus' day would never leave behind a respectable flock of 99 sheep to go after one that he had lost. And a wise woman would never turn over the house just for one silver coin, when 9 others were neatly held in her purse. Neither, then, would this audience, those who gathered near to Jesus, be inclined to turn away from all that they had to grumble about, in order to welcome outcasts and share meals with sinners.

It is absurd to think they would make the time to turn their focus away from themselves and outward, towards an undeserving stranger.

The trouble is, that is exactly what's needed for grumbling to become rejoicing.

The magic of Marie Kondo's method of tidying up is that her focus has shifted. Unlike every other organization expert out there on the market, Kondo doesn't ask her clients to focus on what they are getting rid of, what they need to buy, or what even how they're going to store what they keep. Metanoia is what is needed, a complete change of direction. In her book, she recounts the moment when she knew her tidying efforts had been focused on all the wrong things... "I had been so focused on what to discard, on attacking the unwanted obstacles around me, that I had forgotten to cherish the things that I loved, the things I wanted to keep. Through this experience, (she continues) I came to the conclusion that the best way to choose what to keep and what to throw away is to take each item in [my hands] and ask: 'Does this spark joy?' If it does, keep it. If not, dispose of it."ⁱⁱⁱ

It may seem a little odd to compare the Konmari method to the spiritual practice of repentance, or to layer this book over the Bible and let the one inform the other... but at the same time, I wonder what might happen if from the middle of our grumbling, we were to take hold of each item, each idea, each priority that we have and ask ourselves Kondo's question, might we rediscover a path that to repentance?

If we were to hold onto our priorities, each one at a time, and ask: "Does this spark joy?"
Might we need to do some rearranging?

If we were to put each of our possessions into our hands and ask: "Does this spark joy?"
Might we feel a little less cluttered?

If we were to examine our lives, our calendars, our relationships, and our work... each piece, one at a time and ask: "Does this spark joy?"
Might we discover a need for the same kind of reorientation that Jesus offered to the scribes and Pharisees in Luke, chapter 15?

If we are - like our fellow Americans - declining in happiness, losing our joy, maybe it's time to do this kind of self-examination. Maybe we will learn that everything we have, everything we are working for, and all the things that fill our lives... maybe those things do not spark joy because they don't get us any closer to Jesus.

Even the tax collectors and sinners were moving in closer to Jesus!
Maybe in their drawing near, they rediscovered some joy?

I wonder if we were to take that same poll, the one TIME Magazine reported, I wonder if we would prove to be an unhappy bunch. And if so, I wonder if we might be in need of a little repentance today? A turning of sorts, a complete re-organization and wholistic reorientation? I wonder if we might be willing to repent and turn away from all the sheep

and coins that we have accumulated to go back and search for the one thing that we have lost. The one thing that can spark joy, which is a life lived moving in closer toward Jesus.

Maybe there are some here today who are making that parabolic shift already. Maybe they might teach us about turning away from the 99 and seeking after the 1. Maybe they might exude their joy because they are practicing each day welcoming outcasts and setting tables for sinners – just like Jesus.

This is what it means to repent day after day... to seek out the sinner, the outcast and the stranger and to make a table for them. After all, if we orient our lives seeking after Jesus... we already know where to find him.

Eating with all the wrong people,

welcoming those who have never been invited,

and calling us away from the 99 other things that are grumbling for our attention.

According to Jesus, *that* is where joy is found.

ⁱ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/12/06/not-only-are-americans-becoming-less-happy-were-experiencing-more-pain-too/>

ⁱⁱ Marie Kondo. Loc 503 Kindle Book, *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up*. 2014