

A number of years ago, my sister Elisabeth gave our father a book for his birthday. It was called *The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning: How to Free Yourself and Your Family from a Lifetime of Clutter*. As far as I know, he read the book cover to cover.

Little did Elisabeth know though, that visits from Mom and Dad, or visits home to Mom and Dad, would become a dangerous thing! While I was home last week I was able to help Dad by going through much of the remaining things of mine. Papers, pictures, books and some other things. But pulling out of the driveway Monday morning, my car was packed to the gills! Rugs, a recliner, a TV, nordic skis and poles, a camper chair, stacks of old CDs, a 5 pound bag of oatmeal, a cooler full of old papers, etc. I could barely fit my suitcase and work bag. They let me over the border with all this stuff and I eventually got home to Red Lodge, having enjoyed a few of those old CDs along the way.

I need to tell you though, the thing I was most excited about was that TV. Dad and I had carefully wrapped it up and packed it in the car using cardboard to protect it. This would be my first ever TV. And as the miles went by I started feeling like it was a mark of adulthood. I'm 38, settling into a call I love, with this house I love - it's about time I have a TV, and a nice one, t'boot.

When I got home I unpacked and brought everything inside, the TV last of all. Once I had it all set up exactly where I had imagined it would go (it looked really good), I found the remote and turned it on. About one quarter of the screen rendered an image. The rest was black, starting with a crack at the top that spread across the rest of the screen. The screen was totally busted.

My reaction surprised me more than the state of the TV - I'd just traveled 531 miles with this thing in my backseat. I was disappointed, certainly but it was more than that. I could suddenly see (reflected off the black of the screen) an importance I had put on this thing. Setting up my first ever home has been a joyful experience and this TV was (strangely) something of a crowning achievement, the one thing missing that would complete the whole thing, even my burgeoning latent adulthood.

Stuff can take on a certain role. It can quietly begin to fill a void we don't even know is there. It can creep up on us without our noticing, until we do, realizing that the void is still there.

So here we have a rich man - a rich man with a question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

How do you hear the rich man asking this question? How does it feel to you? Is it confident? Like he saunters up to glad hand Jesus and casually ask, making conversation? We hear that this man ran up and knelt before Jesus. Finding this man on his knees, how does the question sound? It sounds to me rather desperate. Even pleading.

This scene I see reflected broadly in the world today. The rich man's question comes from a worrying sense that something is missing. Despite his achievements, despite all that he's acquired, despite the accolades he receives from a world that values everything he has, he can't shake the feeling that something is missing.

This is a feeling run rampant in the world today - the sense that there is something beyond everything, something missing. I don't hear people asking how to get eternal life necessarily, but I hear a pleading question that sounds similar: "what must I do to have a spiritual life?" It's spoken very seldomly but you see our consumer culture responding enthusiastically to the mostly silent demand. People are looking for a connection to their spirits, to spirituality, to that "something more" that seems to elude us - this, to many, is what feels missing.

The search for a spiritual life though is not only out there, it's also in here. That search is something many church goers and even pastors find themselves participating in. For some, this search drives them to church. Some of us even find it here, like some of you - a sense of connection between something deep inside you with something altogether outside you.

But many people do not find this in church. The Church often has a hard time furnishing a connection to the divine. The traditions, the imagery, the scripture, the form and even the term "worship", if you're unfamiliar, can distract from the Spiritual, causing an initial openness in people to slam shut. "Spiritual but not religious" is the way many who've tried church identify themselves. It's a statement that reveals the truth that a spiritual life is somehow fundamental to human life.

In the introduction to her book *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today*, Joan Chittister writes this:

Over and over again, cures and cults and psychological exercises are regularly tried and regularly discarded while people look for something that will make them feel good, steady their perspective, and bring meaning and direction to their lives. **But, as the ancient story demonstrates, if we are not spiritual where we are and as we are, we are not spiritual at all.** We are simply consumers of the latest in spiritual gadgetry that numbs our confusions but never fills our spirits or frees our heart.

The commodification of the “spiritual life” is the response our culture has made to this systemic feeling that something is missing. Indeed, all commercial enterprises thrive by feeding that feeling in people. “What you need,” they tell us, “is this Spiritual Do-it-Yourself Kit, now on special!” This makes me wonder what the rich man had tried using to fill that spiritual void before he found himself at the feet of Jesus.

Having heard the question, Jesus reminds him of the law, the commandments: “But Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth!” as if to say, “The elusive piece is still missing: what MORE must I do?” “You do lack one thing;” Jesus says, “go, sell what you own, give the money to the poor, and you will [find what you seek]; then come, follow me.”

Jesus points to his wealth - an apparently common barrier to the Kingdom of God, to Eternal Life, to a Spiritual Life. This is where the rich man turns pale, then turns away in grief. This is where the disciples get “perplexed.” After all, this was a culture, not so very different from our own, in which wealth was seen as a divine reward for one’s righteousness. Hearing Jesus say “Give up your wealth and be poor” must have been shocking. But do we not echo the cry of the disciples? “Who then can be saved?!”

I heard a story this week about a woman who was in crisis and went to a Christian spiritual care center to find help. She was assigned a spiritual director who was an old catholic nun. The nun listened to the woman then told her two things: First, she said “God is love.” Second, she said this, “Remember you are poor.’ She explained, ‘You do not have the resources to save yourself, fix your problems or change the world - only God does.’”

CC [Heidi Haverkamp](#) September 12, 2018 | *Are People Good?*

“Blessed are the poor,” Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke. This is at once horrifying (so much so that Matthew tacks on “in spirit” to make it more palatable) and easily romanticized - the “spiritual bliss” of poverty. These help us to hear it then dismiss it, but in doing so we miss something important - that it’s not poverty that Jesus blesses but the perspective that poverty makes possible. **Achievement and accumulation stand in the way of our knowing Want and Surrender.** Jesus invites the rich man to an encounter with these, to the fundamental admission: “I am poor.” Confessing in honesty the truth of “where we are, as we are,” is where the Spiritual Life (entrance to the Kingdom, Life Eternal) truly begins.

CC [Ragan Sutterfield](#) June 29, 2016 | *In Any Need or Trouble*

And we resist it. Even in the face of that missing something, we would rather cling to the material that is the measure of our value in this culture than admit we have nothing at all but Need. The rich man turns away, resisting in grief. Peter chimes in his resistance to match: “Look, we have left everything and followed you” - Want and Surrender have no place for Peter.

A friend of mine who's Jewish told me once that the “Golden Age” of the ancient Israelites is often thought of as the reign of King David. But generations of Rabbi's have pointed to the period of wandering in the wilderness (after Egypt, before the promised land) as the “Golden Age” - the time when the Israelites knew only their complete dependence on God.

I find worship, for me, to be the one thing missing - the place and time where my resistance waivers. Where the admission of my great need is held tenderly by God in community with you. Where the actions and motion of confession and forgiveness, prayer, reaching for that bread and wine support and deepen my sense of Want and my desire to surrender all resistance to the one who seeks our unburdening.

All that stands in the way, that distracts from the truth of our utter poverty is what Jesus seeks to free this man from. "Jesus, looking at him, loved him" in his poverty, in his great want and need, even in his unwillingness to see it, inviting him still to know the truth of his dependence. "Come, follow me."

These are Jesus' words not only for this rich man, not only for me, but for you. Jesus invites us beyond what we believe saves us, beyond what in fact hinders us, to a great and complete unburdening - "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

If this feels hard to believe, if your resistance stands firm even as you desire to let it go, take heart: Jesus sees you - he's looking at you, loving you, knowing you, reminding you that "... for mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

AMEN

Building

Waiting for the new number... Spirituality intangible. Building concrete.
Let's be sure that we're after what we're after... do vs receive...

○ prosper the work of our hands!

The gate...

approach the throne of grace with boldness...
naked as we are...

Peter's impulse mirrors the man's - check that box.

But what a short step it becomes from buying a spiritual life to buying as a spiritual life. We fill the whole, the seeming last box to check, with things. In

Those seeking spiritual connection, probably including many of us, have come running to the feet of our culture: "What must we do to inherit a spiritual life?" We know the plight of the rich man: We've worked hard to be good people, getting to church, and doing all the right things, but something is missing. And here comes someone who can tell us - no not Jesus, but Spiritual Supplies Plus.

But Chittister reveals something else too. The effect of the commodification of spirituality is that the search for spiritual connection cheapens, reducing it to simply another box to check. It encourages us to accept "spiritual gadgetry that numbs" rather than the real thing.

Interesting that Jesus responds to the question by referring to the checklist: “You know the commandments,” he tells this rich man. The man’s response, that he has checked all these boxes, doesn’t sound like relief. All the boxes are checked but he’s still unsure, still unsatisfied, still searching - “What ELSE must I do,” seems to be the real question. Jesus gives him the bad news: “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have [what you seek]; then come, follow me.”

Possessions and wealth keep us distracted... separate us (I’m good/better than others) Not achievement but want and surrender - I am poor. This is the first step toward a robust spiritual life. That god prospers the work of our hands, not the money in our wallets. This points to the neighbor - may they prosper by the work of my hands.

Building

Waiting for the new number... Spirituality intangible. Building concrete. Let’s be sure that we’re after what we’re after... do vs receive...

Children’s Sermon - Elisha and Naaman the Lepper.

by *Heidi Haverkamp* September 12, 2018 | *Are People Good?*

Spiritual rigor is not about the self, in the end, but about the stranger.

“The last shall be first and the first shall be last,” Jesus explains to his disciples. Inheriting eternal life in Christ is not about checking off boxes, not even the boxes of the commandments. It is not about achieving extreme-sport levels of prayer or atmospheric levels of spiritual wisdom. Whatever we think eternal life means, perhaps its first lesson is that we cannot earn or create it ourselves. Perhaps the eternal life that Jesus offers means emptying ourselves and our lives rather than accomplishing anything.

A few years ago, in crisis, I went to a local Christian spiritual center and was assigned a spiritual director who was an elderly Catholic sister. She listened to my story, and she told me two simple things. First, that God is love. Second, pointing her finger at me with firmness and affection, she said: “**Remember, you are poor.**” She explained: you do not have the resources to save yourself, fix your problems, or change the world—only God does. Perhaps she saw my temptation to believe in my own ability and responsibility for my life, in no small part because of my many possessions: great education, successful work life, health insurance, retirement savings, and a house full of stuff. I am tempted to believe that, based on my own efforts and knowledge, I can achieve—am supposed to achieve—a spiritual life, a godly life, eternal life.

Spiritual life as yet another box to check...

by *Ragan Sutterfield*

June 29, 2016

To be with those who are needy and troubled opens for the rest of us an escape from idolatry. Comfort lends itself to comfortable gods,...

It's not as simple as the state of poverty itself being blessed—it is a troubled status, and those who are poor are not automatic saints. But being in the position of need and trouble opens us to the question of what is really true and what is really valuable. To be poor and oppressed, in prison or sick is to live in a position of critique toward the world as it is. **The poor are not blessed as poor so much as blessed by what poverty makes possible.** They are ready and open to the possibility of another reality.

He isn't ready to challenge the unjust systems by which he became rich. He has ruined his appetite on bread and chips, rather than keeping hungry for the main course of the banquet of the Lamb.

In all of this we are praying for Christ as much as to Christ, because it is in the faces of these “scum of the earth” that God keeps showing up.

by **Gordon Cosby**, with Rebecca Stelle

March 24, 2014 *Warning: The Last Shall be First*

Dying helps us to see weakness, and weakness is where God’s strength is made perfect. **It is not until we are utterly bereft of confidence in ourselves that we believe in weakness. Until then, we resist weakness.**

Jesus himself calls this way of weakness “the way, the truth, and the life.” We do not take this seriously. We’re not even committed to it as a principle, much less to actually doing it. Who is this international leader who issues the warning about the first and the last? Is Jesus the Christ? We make a dramatic effort to say he was. Do we even begin to believe this?

The warning of Jesus is being ignored. It’s a warning against what is now the dominant consciousness. Our culture’s assumptions about what comprises a good life, a successful life, are exactly the opposite of that to which Jesus calls us. If one is successful in the world’s sense, then the very things we boast about are signs of our failure.

by **Samuel Wells**

January 27, 2015 Business of the Kingdom

It's a vision of a civil economy, of what work and play, friendship and worship, social concern and evangelism, diversity and identity might look like.