

Kailua Christian Church (UCC)
Sunday Worship, October 15, 2023
Message: “Possessions”
Rev. Irene Willis Hassan

Scripture:

Matthew 19:16-30

16 Then someone came to him and said, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” **17** And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” **18** He said to him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. **19** Honor your father and mother. Also, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” **20** The young man said to him, “I have kept all these;[a] what do I still lack?” **21** Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money[b] to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” **22** When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions. **23** Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. **24** Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” **25** When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, “Then who can be saved?” **26** But Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.” **27** Then Peter said in reply, “Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” **28** Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. **29** And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or[c] children or fields for my name’s sake will receive a hundredfold[d] and will inherit eternal life. **30** But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.

Acts 4:32-37

32 Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. **33** With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. **34** There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. **35** They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. **36** There was a Levite from Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”). **37** He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

Sermon: Possessions

When I was the Chaplain for IHS, I did a weekly Bible study at the men’s shelter on Wednesday nights. One time, we covered the Book of Acts, and this story from Chapter 4 in which the apostles gave up all their possessions and land to share with each other came up. Usually, the men were content to sit quietly and listen to me or whatever guest preacher I invited to teach the scripture and provide our professional

guidance on the text. However, when we went over Chapter 4 of Acts, the conversation erupted with opinions all around.

The homeless men had big thoughts on the Bible saying that we should give up our possessions to serve the needy. They asked, “Are you gonna let me stay in a room in your house, Pastor? If you call yourself a Christian, why do you get to have a house while I rot here in this shelter full of violence and bedbugs?”

It’s a valid question and I was petrified by the uproar in the conversation. I was lucky to have Rev. Brandon Duran with me, former associate pastor for Central Union Church and a dear friend of mine. Pastor Brandon is a much calmer soul than myself and he didn’t seem rattled by the question. Because it is a rattling question, right? Pastor, can I live in your house?

My knee jerk reaction to the question that evening was fear. No, of course you can’t stay in my house, my babies live there and you’re a registered sex offender, sir. But then the text stared back at me from Matthew 19 and Acts 4, telling me I’m supposed to give up my comfortable life to serve this poor man sitting in front of me, and I simply didn’t know what to say.

But Brandon did. He calmly reeled in the uncomfortable static of the conversation and reframed it. He asked them, “How could I take care of my family and my home if I was taking care of you in that home with my family?”

The men argued that they would help him with the kids and the house, that they wouldn’t be a bother, that they would be quiet as a mouse. Then Brandon asked, “And how would that be fair to you, to have to adjust your life and your needs around the expectations of my family and my home?”

No one seemed to have an answer to that, as they reflected on how they would have to shrink themselves in order to fit in the shadow of someone else’s life in order to live in that person’s home.

Brandon was highlighting the problem to these men of this hypothetical scenario in which they all moved into his house with his family. The men would have to shrink themselves, and God never expects us to shrink ourselves. God wants to see us grow, thrive, and become stronger in Him – not to shrink and hide and be subject to another person’s will. Moving homeless men into a pastor’s family home would not accomplish the goal of thriving for anyone involved.

And this is really what’s at the heart of Matthew 19 and Acts 4 – to put aside the things that shrink and restrain us, so that we can grow in the journey that God intends for us. For the young rich man in Matthew 19, the earthly treasures he had accumulated acted as a block for him to listen and follow God. For the homeless men at IHS, being subject to Brandon’s rules of his personal home would also be a block to listening and following God. The young rich man was a servant to his money; the homeless men were proposing being a servant to Brandon’s needs. And God does not want us to be servants to anyone but Him.

As we come closer to our Vision Retreat, one proposal for this church is to turn it into a homeless service center that includes a tiny house village onsite. Given the social context of exponential homelessness in Hawaii, this is a good and righteous use of a church property that many churches have bravely chosen to engage. It seems like an honest reflection of Matthew 19 or Acts 4 – to give up our pristine, valuable property to serve the needy and live in Christian community across class and cultural divides. And for many churches, this *is* the correct response to Biblical calls to give up worldly possessions in support of helping the needy and forming a faithful community space for all.

However, what Jesus is really asking when he asks us to give up our possessions is not to just blindly let go of our things. He's specifically asking us to give up that which blocks us from seeing God's vision for us. For Pastor Brandon and the homeless men at IHS, the hypothetical situation of letting them live at his house didn't offer anything to let go of blocks in their vision to see God more clearly. For many churches, the prospect of inviting a homeless village on their property similarly would create only more strife and division than clarity in God's wisdom for them. The possessions that keep us from knowing God aren't all uniform.

Further, the possessions that keep us blocked aren't always physical objects, like money or property. We can also possess time, relationships, ideologies, and traditions. For Kailua Christian Church, perhaps having a possessive attitude over our property *is* a block to God's vision for us. But it may also not be the possession that's keeping us blocked. Perhaps having a controlling attitude over our time and energy may be the possession that's keeping us blocked. Perhaps having a possessive attitude over what worship and time spent together looks like is keeping us blocked. As we lead up to the Vision Retreat, I ask that you prayerfully consider what you possess in our church and in your own soul that's keeping you blocked from seeing God's vision and ask Jesus to help you let that possession go, whatever it may be.

Before I close, please know that handing over the property to a homeless village is not the only model I have to present to this church as a possibility for our future. It's not even my leading favorite model, despite you all knowing how much I deeply care for the homeless. There's other churches that I would definitely recommend that model to, but like I said, the possessions that block God's vision for us and the gifts that God gives to us to create healthy communities in His service aren't all the same. Just look at the Epistles of Paul – the poor man ran around from place to place, making different recommendations for different places that sometimes seemed to contradict each other, all because he understood that communities have contextual stumbling blocks and God places unique gifts in every church.

This week, I urge you to use the Examen prayer that I taught you to listen for what possessions you need to let go of to serve Him, and then let those things go into His care. Then listen for the gifts He's placed in your soul to serve Him, and ask him to strengthen them so that we can build His Kingdom together here in this place.

Next week, I will tell you more about what *is* my favorite contender for this church and my primary recommendation for our future together. However, I too will be asking God to remove the possessions that block me from highlighting His wisdom, and to uplift that which He has placed in me to offer you. I hold my recommendations lightly and look forward to hearing yours, and pray that all we discuss and decide together will be with His infallible guidance, and the direction we choose be of His calling.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father,

We come before you humbly, acknowledging Your grace and wisdom that surpasses all understanding. We bow before Your majesty, recognizing that earthly possessions can often blind us to Your divine vision for our lives. Lord, help us let go of anything that hinders our view of Your purpose and plan.

Grant us the strength to release the hold that earthly possessions have on our hearts. May we detach from the temporary and fleeting treasures of this world, understanding that true riches

lie in the embrace of Your love and the fulfillment of Your purpose for our lives and our church.

May we hold tightly only to the gifts and blessings You have bestowed upon us that amplify Your divine vision. May our talents, resources, and abilities be dedicated to glorifying You and serving others in love and compassion. May we use them as tools to spread Your light and bring hope to a world in need. Teach us to steward our possessions in a way that reflects Your love and glorifies Your name.

In the precious name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Redeemer, we pray.

Amen.