

THINGS IN THE WAY

Pilgrim Congregational Church, Duluth

Dr. Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

September 30, 1973

Luke 12:13b "For a man's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

We live in a society where until recently an abundance of possessions was generally regarded as an unqualified good thing. Even our religious traditions tended to support this attitude. For a long time the idea has been embedded in American Protestant consciousness that an abundance of possessions is a sign of divine favor. If you have it made here and now, undoubtedly that is a token that you have it made in heaven. Conversely, the feeling is rooted in the Yankee soul that people who lack an abundance of possessions must have something wrong with them, not only financially, but morally. In this respect what is sometimes called "The Protestant Ethic" becomes a rather blatant example of fitting creed to greed. The best antidote to it might be to read Jesus' parable of Lazarus and Dives.

For Jesus an abundance of possessions was not an unqualified good thing. On the contrary, an abundance of possessions could be a real obstacle to the kingdom of God. His encounter with two brothers disputing over their inheritance was one more bit of guidance as to how the preoccupation with possessing things destroys the quality of human life.

In all the years since there have been followers of Jesus who tried various solutions to the spiritual challenge posed by the ownership of property. Some, like the very first congregation in Jerusalem, have practiced some form of Christian communism. Others, like St. Francis of Assisi, have taken vows of poverty. Still others, like Lewis Tappan whom I preached about last fall, have labored hard to accumulate large fortunes which they expended freely on causes in which they believed. However well these solutions may have worked in individual cases, none of them has ever worked for everyone. The challenge of covetousness is present everywhere. Two people in a Christian commune can fight as angrily about who gets to use the stove next as two corporation directors over a list of proxies.

The peril that property poses for the soul is broader than the temptations of wealth. This is evident from the fact that the things we value most highly, which is to say the things that wield the most power over us, are not always the most expensive things. Rather they are things like the teddy bear, the rabbit's foot, the favorite briar pipe, the china bowl Aunt Lizzie got in the "Mother's Oats" box. I suspect that there is more than one Duluthian who would be less distressed if his fifty thousand dollar home burned than if he lost his little shack by the lake.

Indeed, I once knew a man whose house did burn down. It was a beautiful house, only two or three years old and everything in it was lost. After I heard the news I went to look for the owner. I found him standing amid the debris. The one thing he regretted most, he said, was losing two little portraits of his children. His wife was out of town at the time of the fire. When she received the news by telephone, the first thing she asked was, "Did we lose those pictures of the children?"

So the concern before us today is not so much a concern about wealth as a concern about things, the things which we own. That such things can be a

blessing is beyond dispute. But if we want to follow the Christian way we need to face a hard fact of life that Jesus repeatedly pointed up and which his serious disciples have never neglected. That fact is this: When it comes to the Christian way, the things we own have a way of getting in the way.

For example, the things we own get in the way when they begin to own us. We become so bent on accumulating property and looking after it that we turn into the slaves of our own possessions.

Some of us, I think, are prone to what might be called the clutter mania. Every so often you read in the press about some person who is found in a house so full of furniture and other objects that he has to tunnel his way in and out. Undoubtedly in its extreme form this tendency is pathological and has some appropriate scientific name. But I suspect that in milder form the clutter mania affects a great many people who otherwise appear to be quite normal. I know that it affects me, and I have always considered myself otherwise quite normal. I accumulate things that I cannot bear to part with yet which are continually getting in my way. I spend most of my life either falling over them or trying to find places to store them. Every once in a while I get fed up and throw a whole lot of things away. But then afterwards, I feel remorseful at all the beautiful objects I have consigned to oblivion.

Clutter is one way that objects tyrannize over us. Another way is by demanding maintenance. Especially in this modern world of gadgets this is true. You can't just buy things and let them sit. Acquiring property is like acquiring a child; it requires attention at the most unexpected and least convenient moments. After World War II thousands of young people who had been reared in apartments decided to return to the earth; they bought big houses in the suburbs and devoted most of their spare time to building patios and seeding lawns. But as the years wore on and joints grew stiffer, many of those post-war homesteaders began to feel that the house and yard were owning them. So increasingly we find such people moving into apartments and condominiums. And their children, who seem to value mobility more than real estate, are doing the same thing.

A strange irony enters into living when we spend so much time maintaining and fussing over our property that we never get to enjoy it. A boy in my neighborhood acquired a motorcycle. Every time I went by his house he was either polishing the motorcycle or tinkering with the motorcycle. I began to wonder if he ever got to ride it. No doubt in the first flush of ownership polishing and tinkering can be a lot of fun. But I fear there are many people in the world who go through life polishing and tinkering an overabundance of possessions, which somehow they never get to use.

By devoting ourselves too exclusively to an abundance of possessions, we become slaves to things. We get bogged down in a morass of little objects most of which we can do without, but all of which reach out to us and suck us under. It is not surprising that some Christians have felt that they had to get rid of all their property in order to purify their souls.

There is another general heading under which we may describe how things get in the way. The things we own get in the way when they become more important than the persons we know.

In the dispute between two brothers Jesus ran into a classic instance of how property destroys human relationships. There is nothing like a will for

breaking up a family. But I hasten to add, for the sake of the lawyers: there is nothing like a person dying intestate for tearing a family into shreds.

Sometimes property does not divide people so much as it obscures people. It pushes personal relationships into the background. I think of the family for whom one of my daughters baby-sat one summer. Every weekend the parents were away on their boat while their children stayed home and largely fended for themselves.

The things we own get in the way when they become more important than persons. This danger affects not only individuals, but whole societies. It is precisely at this point that many people have pointed to a fundamental weakness in our society. So often property values seem to loom larger than human values. Even human life may be subordinated to property.

A Christmas tree dealer not far from where I once lived slept in a trailer on his lot in order to prevent theft of his trees. As part of a fraternal prank, a boy entered the lot and picked up one of the trees. The owner shot him dead. The authorities decided that they had no grounds for prosecuting the man. After all, he was defending his property.

A boy is discovered by a policeman running out of a store. The fugitive refuses an order to halt. He is shot in the act of flight. On more than one occasion in recent years such an incident has led to a major racial disturbance in one of our cities.

Perhaps there is no foolproof way of preventing such events. It is very hard to draw the line on what is the proper or improper use of lethal weapons. I only mention these incidents to show that our society is so constructed that whether we wish it or not, the concern for property can take precedence over human life. Perhaps there is a moral anomaly built into the law itself. If so, we ought to take a second look at it. In any case, it seems to me that we take such incidents much too lightly. They ought to make us shudder and look for a better way.

The issue of property values versus human values poses itself in another way with respect to fair housing laws. People who favor such laws argue that only by means of them can people who are customarily, and sometimes systematically discriminated against, have fair and equal access to what society has to offer. Those who oppose such laws do so on the grounds that they infringe on the rights of property. I think there is something to be said on both sides. But I wonder whether there is not more to be said for those who would give everyone equal access to property regardless of race than those who would reserve to individuals the right to deny property to others because of race.

So many issues of our day revolve around the same question of property versus persons. The scattered site housing program for low income families that was discussed at our Pilgrim Forum last fall is a case in point. So are those conflicts that inevitably arise when an effort is made to house people with special needs in a pleasant neighborhood. And of course many environmental issues raise the same basic question. What comes first - property or persons?

Now there is no neat distinction between property values and human values, or property rights and human rights. Property becomes the extension of persons. For example, I am told by people in authority that the longer

you wear a pair of blue jeans the more valuable they become. That is because the longer you own them the more they express your personality. The point is that the things we own do become intimate expressions of the persons we are. And, of course, people are dependent on property. Therefore, you cannot do violence to property without doing injury to persons.

Admitting that, we need to be careful of trying to draw too straight a line between property values and human values. Nevertheless, a practical distinction can often be made. And we can ask ourselves which sort of values predominate for us and our society.

Millions of people all over the world were enthralled by the superb creation of "The Forsyth Saga" on television. They identified with the characters created by a fine array of actors. But I wonder how many viewers got the point of what Galsworthy was saying about the British merchant class of the turn of the century. How many saw that he was trying to show what happens when the concern for property becomes more important than the concern for persons?

In more recent years a great many people - including especially young people - have viewed American middle-class society in the same light. They have charged that we are a society more concerned with preserving property than with caring for people, more concerned with producing things than with nurturing persons.

* * *

"A man's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Nor the life of a society either. That is what we need to see. Possessions get in the way of life when the things we own begin to own us and when our concern for property takes precedence over our concern for persons. As Christians we face the unending challenge of putting things in their place.