

Sweating the Small Stuff: Take Out the Trash

Dr. Tom Pace

May 3, 2020

Genesis 1:1-5; 26-27

*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. Genesis 1:1-5 Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Genesis 1:26-27*

Let me begin today by offering you a word of encouragement. Isaiah 40 begins with these words, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." (Isaiah 40:1) When we think of the word *comfort*, we think of something soft. A comfortable bed for example. But the word *comfort* is different. It's Latin and is composed of the prefix *com* meaning *together* like *companion* is someone you eat bread with – from the word *panis* meaning bread. And the *fort* part of *comfort* comes from *fortis* meaning *strength*. Comfort means together strength, strong together. *Comfort, comfort my people says your God. Stay strong together, my friends. God is with us. God is showing us the way.*

Today we are continuing our series on "Sweating the small stuff: How we find God in the very daily-ness of our lives." Our theme today is "Take out the trash."

Let us pray. *Gracious God, open us up, open our eyes that we might see, open our ears that we might hear, open our hearts that we might feel. And then, O Lord, our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

The box arrived during the week last week. Dee had been waiting for it and wondering why it was taking so long to be delivered. And when it arrived, she opened it expectantly and there it was! It was full of beautiful things! It was from the Container Store. And it had inside a new spice rack, all organized with shiny matching tops. And there were all kinds of cool Plexiglas things.

So, after a few days of work and creativity, our pantry is now super organized. Check this out! Here's the spice rack. Here are those Plexi-Canisters. There was a place for everything, and everything was in its place.

My wife likes things organized, and I must admit that after 42 years of marriage, she has had a bit of an impact on me. When I was younger, I didn't care about organizing anything. Chaos was good as far as I was concerned. I was a slob.

Now at least I like things organized. I don't organize that well or that often, but I confess that I do like it that way.

I thought I would worship today from my study so you could see the books only partially organized behind me. Sid Davis, our Director of Music and Fine Arts, is a proponent of organizing your books by color. So, with that system, when you need a book, you can probably remember what color it is. That's a very interesting approach.

Here you have these incredibly beautiful flowers beside me and a stack of books that need to be re-shelved so that you know that there is still lots of work to do.

This Coronavirus season has been a time of organization for lots of folks. More people I know have cleaned out their sock drawers and closets and toy chests. They figure they might as well since there's no place to go.

Here's what I would tell you. When you're organizing, you're doing God's work. God works to create order from disorder. The Scripture today is God's organization work. I didn't put it all in the story of creation, but note that God is organizing. Like we separate the white socks from the colored socks, the dress shirts from the casual shirts in our closet. Or the wrenches from the hammers in the garage, or the cumin from the cinnamon in the pantry. That's what's God is doing. He's separating. He starts with chaos, and water is the symbol of that chaos. It is over all creation. And he starts separating, night from day, sky from water, then earth from water. Creating, organizing. Putting plants and animals in types. Kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, species. Do you remember that from High School biology? I learned it with the memory

scheme that goes “King Philip came over for good spaghetti.” Kingdom, phylum, class, order, family genus, species.

Let me say that I’m awfully glad that God allowed there to be some randomness in this world. That’s how we’ve experienced evolution. That’s how this amazing beauty. Everything does not need to look like a master-planned community, little boxes on the hillside made of ticky-tacky. Nice to see a small house in the midst of large ones. Diversity is a powerful thing, and one of God’s great gifts.

And then the culmination of creation, the very pinnacle God created us. You and me - in God’s image. In God’s image means we can work God to do the same thing God is doing. *Imago Dei*. When we order the world, we are co-working with God.

Now at the end of each day of God’s creating, God says, “It was good.” And at the very end of all of God’s creating, he said, “It is very good.” That sense of satisfaction.

Have you ever cleaned out a closet or the garage or organized the books on your shelves or organized some part of your home or your office, and then when you get done, you sort of cock your head and look at it? There’s that deep sense of satisfaction, “Yes, I have ordered that which is chaos.” And he looked at it, and it was good.

On our webpage today, there’s a great video from an organization expert to help you if you’re ready to do some of this small stuff work of God. Yes, of course, there are more important things to do than to organize your spice rack. It is truly one of the small stuff that we’ve been talking about. But we can find the presence of God in that small stuff. And when we bring order from the chaos it can be an act of worship, an offering to God, and a co-working with God.

Now the second act of worship we can offer is to fix what is broken. What happens in the next nine chapters of Genesis is that God’s perfectly ordered world goes to pot. There is sin against God. There is murder in the Garden. There is pride in building a tower. Soon the waters of chaos return to flood the earth. And God thinks it’s time to just start over. But something inside says, “But not *completely* over.” God holds onto Noah and his family and two of every kind of creature. And ever since then since sin entered the world God has been in the business of fixing that which is broken.

I must say that sometimes I am annoyed at the things that need fixing, and they just sort of pile up. The computer printer doesn't work; the Internet doesn't work, the car won't start, the tree in the backyard is dying and probably dead. The downstairs windowsill is showing some sort of rot, and you can push on it, and it's soft, and the fence gate won't stay shut. And the lightbulbs on the back patio all need replacing. And oh, those fire detector batteries - just at the worst time begin to start beeping and need to be replaced.

The other day the garage door came off its tracks, and it was dangling over the cars in the garage and particularly over my precious 1984 CJ7 Laredo. And the guy came to fix it and charged me an arm and a leg for 15 minutes of work fixing what was broken.

There's always something broken needing fixing. It's the nitty-gritty of life and you will never get to the point when it's all fixed. I'm blessed I came up in the era of Industrial Arts education - shop class. So, I have a willingness to try to fix that which is broken. There was a fence around our air conditioner that was broken, and I repaired it last weekend. This weekend I installed a drip irrigation line because some of our beds weren't getting water. Now I'm one of those guys in the lower half of people being able to fix things. I'm not one of those super fix anything guys. But when I do fix things, I know I'm doing God's work, and I see it as an act of worship. I'm co-working with God.

There are so many things in the world around us that need fixing. Across the street from St. Luke's, there's a woodshop, and before it went into hiatus because of the coronavirus, the women and men there made things and fixed things. These are people who can understand that what they're doing is God's work, and if you go over there, you can tell because it feels a bit like a worship service/party every time you go.

After Hurricane Harvey, we had amazing folks like Jon Norman and Tommy Stone, who helped those of us who don't know how to muck out houses or install insulation and do the work needed to fix flooded residents. We would have been lost without their expertise and their work. Now that repair, that wasn't small stuff.

Friends, so many more things need fixing as well; we have social systems that are broken. A judicial system that's broken. We have marriages that are strained or breaking. We have friendships or other relationships that are broken. We have hearts that need to be fixed. These are not small stuff either, but these things are the work God is doing. And when we participate in any one of these, if we join in helping one little way, if we give food to one child or one family, if we

bring canned goods to CCSC. If we help one person find one job, if we befriend one person across cultural lines, it's a small thing, but it's work of fixing that which is broken. When we fix what's broken, it's an act of worship, an offering to God.

Now the third thing we do as an offering to God is to eliminate that which is extra. You know, it's hard to let some things go. A few weeks on trash day I carried out a wicker patio rocker where one of the rocker feet or rocker legs was broken. I left it at the curb to be picked up, and I looked out later, and it appeared forlorn. It was hard for me. I didn't need it anymore, and it reminded me of something. I'm not sure exactly what it was - maybe memories of some sort - touched something inside of me. Nobody wants to be useless or forgotten or discarded.

But things are, after all, just things, and they can weigh us down. They can prevent our growth. There are all sorts of things in our lives that need to be discarded. The trash needs to be taken out.

There is this big tree in our front yard, and for some reason, it is particularly prone to producing those little shoots that go straight up. They're called *suckers*, and they can contribute nothing to the tree, and they just take more energy than they can provide with their leaves. They block out the sun. So, they need to be pruned. This work of pruning - of thinning - of emptying of simplifying, of discarding, is such challenging work.

I will avoid all the Marie Kondo references that say give away everything that doesn't give you joy. But sometimes you have to prune.

At some point, one of our staff said something about what someone did, and they said, "Wow, that was really extra!" I'd not heard that word, and she explained that it means overdramatic, like over the top, more than you need. I'm not sure it's the exact way to think of it, but I think there are a lot of things in my life that are just "extra." They are suckers, and they suck energy. They don't give me joy, they don't give God joy, but I hold on to them for some reason. And they just suck attention, and they feed bad attitudes. I find myself focusing on things that are not excellent and pure and true, as Paul tells us to do in Philippians. When we eliminate that which is extra, we're doing God's work.

Here's the last thing and it's the most important. Include the important inside. Now here's the thing, when we order that which is disordered when we fix that which is broken, when we eliminate that which is extra, we're doing God's work, and we can make it an offering of God in

worship. It can be holy work. That's the whole point of this message to help you understand the daily nitty-gritty work you're doing as a way of offering yourself to God.

But I want to offer you a warning. Over the years, I've heard people say, "Cleanliness is next to godliness." Maybe it isn't next to godliness, but it is not the same as godliness. The early Jews believed that it was the case. The dairy was to be separated from the meat; the Sabbath was separated from other days, everything in its place. Regular cleansing in a ritual bath. And Jesus recognized these laws, but he was far more concerned with people confusing this external cleanliness from internal cleanliness. An external purity from an internal purity.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, "Woe to you Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, you cleanse the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup so that the outside may also become clean." Then he goes on to talk about the Pharisees as "whitewashed tombs" who looked beautiful on the outside but were full of bones and all kinds of filth on the inside.

You see, there's internal work to do as well. And I suggest to you that as you do the external work, you allow that to guide you to do the internal work. You can order that which is disordered internally. When we get our priorities out of order, when we don't put first things first, we bring chaos into our lives. "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all other things will be added to you as well." Put first things first, and the other things will fall into place.

God is interested in fixing that which is broken in your soul and life as well. And we can open ourselves to that kind of healing. It's called sanctification, making us both holy and whole. It's about replacing our hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. It's about replacing greed with generosity. It's about removing our resentment and replacing it with forgiveness. It's about replacing our lust with authentic love and respect. It's about moving from loving things and using people to loving people to using things. Psalm 51 says, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

You can eliminate that which is extra. Hebrews 12 says, "Let us lay aside every weight and the sin which clings so closely and run with perseverance the race that is set before us. Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

There are some things I need to prune from my life, I know. Attitudes, behaviors, and things I do that Dr. Phil would say, "Well, Tom, how's that working for you?" Maybe it's time to give them up.

Here's what I do believe, and I believe it with all my heart. God is not finished with me yet. That by the power of the Holy Spirit, God is at work putting my life in order and setting my priorities straight. God loves me even with my brokenness but isn't content to leave me that way and is at work repairing all those broken places. And God is at work rooting out all the sin, which is sucking the abundant life out of my soul. That's the kind of God we have.

So, this weekend I'm told by the boss that we're going to clean out and reorganize the garage. I have been resisting. I think the garage is awesome just the way it is. But I'm sure that after appropriate complaint and stalling, I will give in. And we will get about God's work of ordering the chaos. And we'll do it as an assignment from God.

Let's pray. *Gracious God, when we look at the world around us, there is so much chaos and so much brokenness. God, we thank you that you are about the business of putting it right again, of re-ordering our lives and fixing that which is broken. Of pruning away the things that suck the abundant life right out of us. God, open us up to that spirit we so much want to be made whole. And receive the small ways that we work alongside you that we co-work with you in ordering the world. Receive them as an act of worship. In the name of Christ, we pray, Amen.*