

August 7, 2016 (For Website)
“Parable of the Rich Fool”
Matthew 26:6-13 Luke 12:13-21

I remember the first time I wandered down the aisles of Sam’s Club about 25 years ago. My mother had come to visit us in and wanted to help us stock up on necessities before she returned home. Wow, I thought, this is great, I won’t have to buy cleaning supplies, frozen foods, or paper products for weeks. As I looked up and down the aisles at products stacked from floor to ceiling, I began to feel an uncomfortable sensation. Despite my gratitude for Mom’s generosity and for the abundance surrounding me, I had a strange heaviness of heart. As I looked at this warehouses of plastic and cardboard, metal, Styrofoam, glass, and rubber, I had a momentary panic. Where was this stuff ultimately all going to go? How much could Mother Earth, in her generous support of human life and activity, finally hold?

Like the rich man in the parable, many of us have encountered the dilemma of having no place to store the products of our opulence. The late comic, George Carlin, once proclaimed with prophetic humor how we all have so much stuff that we now have to buy stuff to put our stuff in. The wealthier among us get bigger homes or second homes and the rest of us pack our garages or basements to the brim, put up a shed out back, to hold the overflow or pay a monthly fee to store in in an storage facility. Hoarding has become wide spread and is now recognized as a mental disorder. Hoarders hide in a cluttered mess of useless things, which they keep adding to, until these things take up the very space in which they could be living. Their homes or apartments often become filthy to the point of being hazardous to their physical health. This problem is much bigger than the illness of certain individuals. As a society, we are being smothered in our disposable waste—in landfills and public dumps, riverbeds, deserts, and in the hollows of hills. Our appliances, technological equipment, and disposable items have multiplied exponentially and there is no end in sight. Toasters and televisions sets, microwaves, automobiles, refrigerators, computers, cans, bottles, plastic bags, and soiled diapers to say nothing of the chemical and nuclear waste which surround us. As manufacturers and consumers, we

have set loose our own Frankenstein of industrialism and materialism over which we as a civilization, as a global community, have lost control.

Contemplating this growing sea of waste, reminds me of the children's tale of the magic porridge pot. In this tale, a poor little girl is given magic words. "Cook little Pot" which when she speaks, make the pot bubble up with porridge and she and her mother are never hungry again. When the pot is full, the girl says more magic words, "Stop, little pot" and it stops. But invariably, another character, who is unprepared for the task, overhears the magic words, speaks them, and starts the pot boiling. Then, not knowing the words to stop it, the pot begins to set loose an avalanche of porridge, which fills the room, then the house, runs out the front door into the street and chases the villagers menacingly through the town. This simple tale is not just for children but an important lesson for all of us. An industrial/materialistic economy is destroying our planet and will ultimately bury us if we are unable to understand the devastating power of what we have unleashed upon the world and commit to radical change. Albert Einstein once said, "You cannot solve a problem with the thinking that created it." In order to change our ways we have to change our thinking, our way of seeing what matters and living by it.

I recently saw a film called, "Captain Fantastic" about a family who moved far away into the woods to live simply and sustainably. They were a pretty outlandish crew, but the movie brought up a lot of thoughts and questions for me about how to live honestly and ethically. If our Christian faith calls us to care for the voiceless and forgotten ones in our society; the widow, the orphan, the imprisoned, the poor, doesn't it make sense that it also cries out for us to speak up for the earth and for the unrepresented future generations who will inherit it from us? In the book, *Spiritual Ecology*, an essay by Susan Murphy presents a spiritual perspective on this alarming ecological crisis. She writes,

Doing no harm to the earth remains low on the agenda of an intensely industrialized, energy hungry world. Seven billion of us are now transfixed by an impossible promise of all securing the extreme material and technological advantages presently lavished upon members of the industrialized world. The dense forms of energy—harnessed first from coal and then so spectacularly from oil—have lifted the

material lives of a growing number of us to levels of physical ease undreamed of in earlier generations, and this has happened so rapidly it has been hard to catch up with all the harsh implications—though they are certainly now catching up on us...

The dream of an infinitely expandable planet placed entirely at our disposal was always just that, a dream, and it's fast becoming a nightmare. Tumultuous change on a vast scale grows increasingly likely with every day of business as usual. The only question is what forms it will take, which order of climate shocks and political crises will start to shake our world apart, and how people will react as the market collapses as the source of plenty evaporates.

None of us can outrun the unstoppable avalanche of porridge that has been set forth on this earth threatening to engulf us. The poor will, and are, suffering first and most from the avalanche of industrialism and the militarism that supports it, but not even the rich fool with his crops stored in bigger and bigger barns (or his contemporary counterpart with his money in big banks) can finally be safe from its destruction.

There is a Greek term, "Anima Mundi" which means the "soul of the world." It suggests an understanding of the world *around* us as sharing a common life *with* us—an understanding of the things surrounding us as animate not inanimate objects—as having soul. The excessive materialism in our world today, is not necessarily a *love* of the things of this world but might perhaps be just the opposite-- a fundamental disregard or lack of respect for the things of this world as full of soul. The earth and its creatures and beings, its foliage and land and water, its great edifices and artful creations of civilization are too often exploited to feed a wounded narcissism or to fuel a desperate hedonism rather than to be cherished and exalted and to celebrate the goodness of God and God's good earth.

When we have a deep attachment to something, we allow that thing to express its own subjectivity freely—to reveal its own beauty and purpose. This kind of relationship to a thing seems to take time to develop and requires a certain openness on our part to being affected or changed by it. Even if we are emotionally mature enough to see this in our human relationships it is harder to recognize it in our relationships to things.

I have always been deeply moved by the stories of immigrants to this country escaping political or religious persecution in their own land and carefully choosing the few objects of greatest value and meaning to their lives and tenderly placing them in one little trunk or sewing them into the lining of their clothes as they traveled from home to start a new life. Perhaps it was a young Russian Jewish mother tucking in her Grandmother's Shabbat candlesticks or a German boy clutching his Grandfather's Bible. Perhaps it was a music box or a treasured doll, a well loved and well used tool of ones trade like those of a watchmaker or taylor or blacksmith. Perhaps it was a musical instrument that once played the songs that now serve as the only link to their lost heritage—things that hold their memories, things, which have soul. Anima Mundi. Today's desperately poor refugees do not even have the luxury of these few things. Perhaps their treasures are not tangible but they bring cherished stories and songs of the heart, dances of the soul and memories that make life bearable.

In our scripture passages this morning, Jesus speaks of the emptiness of amassing an abundance of possessions. Yet, in Matthew's parable, Jesus praises a woman, who despite criticism from others, takes costly oil and lavishly anoints his head. To Jesus, the excessiveness here was not waste. Why? What is the difference? The woman anointing the head of Jesus was opening her heart up to a moment of great purpose. She recognized the spiritual truth of Christ's presence on earth and the preciousness of the moment in time she had been permitted by fate to share with him. She glimpsed the mystery that she was a part of, respected the value of the oil for the use to which she put it, and had the courage to take an action, which would be remembered for generations to come.

When is material excessiveness desperate, defensive, and soulless? When is it delicious, discriminating and soulful? Returning to the fairytale of the magic porridge pot we might ask, when is our "magic" our curse and when is it our blessing? The talent and creativity that have gone into the development of our industrialized world are indeed amazing—the product of creative minds-- and yet there production is causing a threat to

the very life of this planet. Perhaps we can use this same human creativity—this same magic—to help us stop this boiling pot. Henry David Thoreau, in his address to the Harvard graduating class of 1837 said, “This curious world we inhabit is more wonderful than convenient, more beautiful than it is useful; it is more to be admired and enjoyed than used.” Is our convenient fast paced lifestyle, in which we try to feel protected by our wealth and possessions or to build our egos by the size of house or car or boat-- by the cost and number of our possessions, worth the environmental cost—worth the risk to future generations? Is this lifestyle even working for us *now*—do we feel safer or happier or more secure than previous generations? Are we living closer to our hearts or to our God? Jesus words would suggest that it is not about living the life of a monk or denying the pleasure of the material world. It is about embracing life with a discriminating heart. It is about recognizing the real value of things in themselves, rather than addictively seeking to possess more and more. As we seek to fill the void of our lack of understanding of ourselves or each other, we simultaneously fill the dumps and ravines and streambeds of our country with the waste of our misdirected endeavors and more tragically we fill the ravines with the bodies of the innocents who have been sacrificed to the driven-ness of the powerful.

A true understanding of Anima Mundi—the soul of the world-- won’t permit us to pollute our environment or ourselves with such callous abandon. Seeking a true understanding of the life and words of Jesus can set us on a simpler, more spiritual path—one where we find our own soul and live courageously and lovingly in this world we share with others, with generations of human souls still to come, and with the profoundly beautiful and varied life-forms of God’s good earth.