

“CLEARING SPACE”

Genesis 2:1-3; John 9:1-24; Luke 15:1-2, 8-10

September 22, 2019

Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins
Westminster Presbyterian Church

The question I invite us to think about this morning is this: What are the things that take up too much space in our lives, our schedules, our hearts and minds ... the things that make it hard to pay attention to the Spirit?

Think about a time in your life – maybe it’s now – when you just felt that your life felt too cluttered, too full, too crowded. What was that about? What *is* that about?

Maybe it’s literally too much stuff. We love our stuff, but ... you have to put it somewhere, manage it, clean it, downsize it. It can get overwhelming.

Sometimes life feels too busy.

Or we feel pulled in too many different directions – work, family, friends, chores, other commitments, taking care of ourselves.

Many of us juggle a host of demands and expectations from others (and ourselves).

Some of us are trying to cope with a host of difficult personal issues, from multiple health issues to broken relationships to baggage from the past or worries about the future.

There are times when the problems and decisions we’re dealing with seem to be too much at once. And then there is the reality of how many things there are in the world to worry about.

Sometimes we begin by feeling not that life is too full but that life is empty – because of loneliness, grief, loss of purpose, old wounds that are unhealed – and we try to fill up that emptiness with alcohol or busyness or shopping or addictive entertainment or the like... and end up in the same predicament: life that feels crowded with stuff we can’t manage very well.

We are living with a lot of anxiety these days – it’s all around us; it permeates our culture; it’s in the church; it’s in our public life; it’s in us. It gets expressed in so many ways.

One of them is what writer Jenny Odell calls “the attention economy.” News 24 hours a day, social media, cell phones in our pockets, text messages, addictive games on our devices, more TV options than we could ever have imagined just a few years ago... all clamoring for our attention every minute. It can be hard to resist, Odell says. And even though there is a lot of benefit to those tools, they feed our anxiety as they try to

redefine what matters, tell us what to think, and (especially) convince us to spend money.

Our consumer culture is designed to create anxiety. (What do I need that I don't already have? Are my clothes or my car too old? Are we going to run out of this? If *they* have that, shouldn't we have it too?) We have become used to thinking of ourselves as consumers, which maybe isn't a surprise since something or other is being marketed to us almost every waking hour... but is "consumers" all we are? Of course we need things to live and we enjoy things that make our lives easier, more comfortable, more beautiful, more fun. Our "stuff" has all kinds of meanings for us, from identity to security. But it's easy to lose track of what we really want, easy to cross that line from using stuff to serving it.

Another manifestation of this anxiety: It seems to me that too many of us live with a lack of margins in our lives. You know, when the budget doesn't take into account an emergency expense, when the schedule for the day doesn't leave time for an appointment to run long or traffic to be slow, when your responsibilities and commitments don't allow for rest and recharging. There are times in all our lives when this is hard to avoid, and there are many people whose circumstances make this a lifelong struggle. But it's strange to me that so many of us who do have choices still choose to live this way.

You don't have to be working two jobs or juggling caregiving or serving in a dozen volunteer roles to be filled with anxiety. Whether it's about health, money, the troubles of our loved ones, or the state of the world, fears and worry can take over our minds. I know a lot of you know exactly what I'm talking about: days and nights going round and round in your mind, trying to figure it all out, replaying old conversations, coming up with new solutions, agonizing over decisions, wondering what you did wrong, obsessing over it all. These thoughts and feelings take up a LOT of space in our hearts and minds.

So do the expectations we place on ourselves: How your house should look. How much money you should have. Where you should be in your career. What you should be doing as a grandparent, or a friend. How this project or that should be done by now. What more you should be doing about ... something. Legitimate questions, some of them, but you can make yourself crazy with this kind of thinking. And we do, always striving for a little bit more of ... something.

All of these things – and more – are not only obstacles to the kind of spacious, grace-filled, whole, free life we want to and ought to be living. They are also obstacles to connection with God. Because they take up so much *space*, in our minds and hearts, in our schedules, in our lives, that there is little room for God's Spirit to get close to us.

But there's another kind of clutter in our minds that I want us to think about, just as real. The story we read from John's gospel this morning is a good example of it. I'm talking about the baggage of false ideas about God. The people in this story who witness Jesus' healing of the blind man are so filled with their preconceived and mistaken beliefs about God that they can't accept the evidence of their own eyes, can't hear Jesus' message, can't rejoice in the healing. Their long-held beliefs tell them that Gods

favor must be earned, that God is a harsh judge, that illness and disability are evidence of God's punishment, that God only acts and speaks in certain ways and through certain people. They see God's commandments as restrictions. And it's interesting to notice the way their beliefs about God translate into their attitude toward other people – they assume the privilege of judgement and build walls of separation.

Maybe we don't have the same beliefs as those long-ago people who could not make room in their world view for Jesus, for healing, for God to do something new. But maybe we also cling to old ideas about God that keep us from seeing what God is doing in the world, or in us.

Maybe that is the essence of sin – that we let ideas about God get in the way of the actual presence of God. And we so readily let our lives, our schedules, our hearts and minds get filled up with those ideas – and with all the other clutter – that there isn't space for God's Spirit to move.

There are so many ways of living cluttered lives, but I think the underlying dynamic is the same: misunderstanding of God's desires for us, and determined clinging to the belief that our worth is in what we do, amass, conquer, understand, or achieve.

And where there are gaps in our doing, our possessions, our winning streak, our knowledge, or our success... our anxiety says we have to fill them up somehow.

But what if, instead of more stuff, more busyness, more work, more worrying, we could think instead about ... making more space?

When you plan margins in your day, you make space.
When you practice Sabbath regularly, you make space.

You make space when you say, "let me think about that" or "do I need that, or do I even really want it?"

You make space when you ask for help.

You make space when you listen.

You make space when you set aside worry for a period of time and think instead about gritudes.

You make space when you pay attention: to what's around you in the physical world, to the people you are with, to your own feelings.

You make space when you disconnect, for an hour or a day.

Worship helps us make space, and so does prayer – real prayer that is more than a list of demands. Confession makes space for forgiveness.

Releasing ourselves – and others – from unreasonable expectations makes space.

Letting go of the need to know or to be right makes space.

Remembering that God is bigger than our imaginings makes space.

I hope this doesn't sound like a self-help book, because that's far from what I mean. We are, I believe, invited to be participants with God in the ongoing work of creation and compassion, not because we are qualified to be but because that's how God wants to do things. So we can make choices that either open us to God's Spirit or put up obstacles. But ultimately, the creative and transformative power is God's, and we don't do anything alone.

In fact, from the beginning (I never looked at the creation this way before, but it's true) God has been making space for us: literally, in the creation of the world. Continually, in providing what we need to live. Spiritually, in showing us a way of life that gives us room to grow and to be the persons we are meant to be. That's what the space of Sabbath, for example, is all about. That's what Jesus was all about.

When I was thinking about our need to have space in our lives for God's Spirit, I suddenly couldn't stop thinking about that story Jesus told of the woman searching for a lost coin (one of three stories in Luke 15 about finding what is lost). Like the shepherd and the father of the lost son in the other stories, this is a God image. We are the coin, of course, precious and worth all that patient searching... and eventually the rejoicing. This time the story struck me a little differently, though. What I kept coming back to was this picture of the woman sweeping, sweeping away all the dust bunnies and bits of dead leaves and dirt and junk that accumulate under the furniture when the floor hasn't been swept in a while. Sweeping away all that "stuff" – literal and figurative – in which we have lost ourselves. All that stuff we thought was so important but which has nothing to do with how much God loves us. Sweeping it away in order to get to us – not just finding us, but clearing away the mess around us so we can be claimed by grace, find space to grow and flourish and live as we were meant to live. This is the work God is doing in us. Can we make space for it?

Resources:

Jenny Odell, Author of *How to Do Nothing*, on Resisting the Attention Economy, Minda Honey, blog.dropbox.com/work-culture, June 21, 2019