

Preached by Rev. JF Hudson at PCUCC: 8/19/07

Scripture: Hebrews 11:33-12:2

“Lay Aside Every Weight”

From the text: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus....”

Here’s some unsolicited pastoral advice on my first Sunday as your pastor. Don’t move: that’s right, don’t ever move from one dwelling to another, and then be forced to go through all, and I mean all of the contents of your life, all of the stuff you’ve piled up in the attic and the basement, all of things you’ve purchased and been given over the years, all of the items you’ve accumulated after all of this time. That’s what I spent the first two weeks of August doing: systematically and somewhat reluctantly just going through all of my worldly possessions and then deciding what to save and what to throw out or give away, what to retain that I deem precious and what to discard that is superfluous; what matters and is lasting and is real, and what I can let go of, just leave behind, and let go of as so much junk, junk.

The average American will move eleven times in her life; I’ve moved fourteen times and you’d think by now I’d have learned how to leave behind most of that junk and yet—it is hard to finally let go of our stuff, isn’t it? To purge, to toss, to unload. No: we want to hang on to “it” even if we really don’t need it anymore. Like—I really should pack up that CB radio I got on special at KMart in the mid-70’s, right? Any one here still have one up in the attic? You never know when it might come in handy. Or the burnt-orange colored fondue pot with six matching forks—admit it—like me you still have one of those: they may make a comeback! Or this—a record album, anyone remember these? As the comedian George Carlin said, “A house is just a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get more stuff.”

As I sorted through all of my stuff I created a pile of junk in my driveway. I committed myself to being ruthless about throwing away as much as I could, to take as little as I possibly could ahead to Sherborn, to see this move as a wonderful opportunity to finally let go of much of the junk, the junk I’ve been dragging around for nearly twenty years of moves during my ministry. By the day before I moved there was a mountain of refuse: eight feet long, six feet high, ten feet wide. Everything from old mattresses, to broken computer printers, to hundreds of photos I never bothered to put in albums, to worn out pots and pans...well, you get the picture.

But then a miracle happened. I called a guy named Bob in Concord, Bob the junk guy as he is known. And he came with a big red dump truck and he and his assistant loaded up all my junk and then he pulled away and it was all gone, all gone, all that junk but first: I had to find it, name it and then have the courage to just let it go, let it go, all to prepare to move on to my next home, here.

Junk: we do hang on to so much, too much, don’t we? And not just physical stuff and junk, but also our emotional, our spiritual, our psychic stuff and junk too. Try as

hard as we might still over the years we humans often end up dragging around an awful lot of junk we just cannot, for whatever reason, let go of, discard, give up, throw away. Old scores we've yet to settle. Ancient resentments we're unwilling to let go of. Old sins we just cannot forgive ourselves for. Well worn regrets we hang on to and re-run in our minds as we lay awake in bed at night. Old tapes that play in our heads and tell us we're just not good enough. Sound familiar?

It's a broken relationship you still haven't come to terms with. A missed opportunity you still beat yourself up over. A cross word you spoke to another or that was spoken to you. A person who hurt you that just cannot bring yourself to forgive all these years later. But here's a spiritual lesson and truth I faced this week and I share today. My friends, to move on, to move up, to grow in God, to just run the race of life, to live, to love with passion we first must be courageous to finally let go of, throw away, just toss out all of that spiritual junk that continues to weigh us down and hold us back.

That's what Saint Paul is talking about in today's scripture. He views this Christian life as a race of sorts. As folks of faith, the living, we are surrounded as if in a stadium by a great cloud of witnesses, the dead, who cheers us on from the stands of eternal life. And there in the distance is Jesus running ahead with vigor and life. But as Paul declares, "Let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and [then] let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus."

We can't follow Jesus if we insist on holding ourselves back, weighted down under so much spiritual junk. If you've ever run a marathon or biked a long distance or hiked a tall mountain you know the rule is to always lighten up as much as you can; to leave behind all the extra stuff and to carry only that which is essential. Do you hear that? Dare we this day consider just what kind of spiritual junk we still cling too? Dare we finally throw it out, give it to God? That choice is always ours to make.

It's not always so easy. I've got a close friend who was divorced twenty years ago. His wife left him early in their marriage for another man. He was left behind to raise two young children. He did a great job, has a good life and yet he still speaks of this heartbreak as if it happened yesterday. His anger burns red hot. He has yet to find new love I think, in part, because his ex-wife and all that resentment is still so alive for him. He is weighted down, buried and will not move on. Another friend of mine faced almost the same situation just four years ago. And three weeks ago she got remarried to a guy she absolutely loves and who loves her but how? In part, as she told me—she let go. She forgave. She released. She moved on. She gave up all of the weight of sin and hurt that had clung so closely and then joyfully got back into the race of life. Do you hear that?

We hang on to our junk for lots of seemingly good reasons. It makes us feel safe. It is familiar and comforting in a strange way. It defines us in a way we understand. It makes us feel right, justified. It is our story. But that's not the way of our dynamic God, the one contained in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ is a marathoner, a runner. He never stays put. He's always moving on, moving ahead. He's calling to us to follow him to redemption, to renewal, to recreation, to new life every day but: we can't run with him unless first we go through all of our junk, all of our stuff and then let go of the things that hold us back. You know what weighs you down. Man I know what weighs me down!

When I was in New Orleans last March as a part of a church mission team helping to rebuild homes, I worked with an incredibly faithful man named Charlie. He lived in New Orleans all his life, raised his kids, worked as a Longshoreman and had just retired

in August 2005 to a new home when that dwelling was inundated under five feet of floodwaters for a month and he and his wife lost everything, I mean everything. The insurance company has still refused to pay him a dime. The state and federal governments have been little help or no help and yet every morning on the worksite Charlie began us with this simple prayer: "Dear God, we thank you for this bright and beautiful day that has never been before and will never be again." If anyone deserved to be angry, resentful, and held back by hurt and pain it was Charlie. But his faith, his Christian faith taught him that the only way he was going to be renewed was by leaving all of that junk behind and finally giving it over to God.

Not to sound flip but I kind of like to think of Jesus as Bob the junk man. For over time I accumulate lots of spiritual baggage, folks I get angry at, sins I wrestle with, demons that won't go away, memories that cry for redemption. And there Jesus the junk guy, showing up faithfully in worship and in prayer, telling me, telling you, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Dump all of it. Let it go. Give it to me. Move on."

It is time, always a good time, to go through our junk and figure out what we need to throw away. Jesus awaits. May we all have the commitment to call on him and ask him to haul it all away. Then the race continues! Let all God's people say, "Amen!"