

July 29, 2018  
Trinity Church, Hartford

10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

2 Kings 4:42-44  
Psalm 145:10-19  
Ephesians 3:14-21  
John 6:1-21

The Rev. Dr. Frank G. Kirkpatrick

I want to talk to you this morning about stuff.

You may recall the story of the young man who had been raised in a very wealthy family and then while driving drunk killed four persons. His defense rested on his claim that he had been raised in such a pervasive environment of wealth, privilege, and unlimited access to stuff, that he could not perceive the difference between right and wrong. His moral compass had been destroyed by what he took as his entitlement to have and to do whatever he wanted -- there were no moral limits on what he should do because there were no financial limits on what he could do. This defense gave rise to the term affluenza. It builds on the word 'influenza' which creates a weakness or even disease in the body which needs to be treated medically. Affluenza is a disease of a different sort but it creates its own form of weakness and harm to the person and others who are affected by his or her actions. Affluenza is a spiritual affliction. It is caused by desiring to have more and more

stuff, to be affluent, abounding in riches, abundantly wealthy in material goods. Of course we would all probably like to have more stuff: the desire to accumulate stuff is the engine that drives our economic market system or so say professional economists. And when we don't think we have enough stuff we often seek to find someone or something to blame for our sense of relative poverty. But why is such a search for more stuff a problem? Why is it a disease, especially of the spirit? Because it is rooted in the false belief that getting stuffed with stuff is the way to happiness and fulfillment. Let's pause a moment and look at this word 'stuff'. It has both positive and negative connotations. Stuff can mean the essence of something and in that sense it is a good thing: Shakespeare asks what is the stuff of which dreams are made? We say of someone intelligent that she knows her stuff. Prominent astronauts are said to have the right stuff. But stuff can also mean a collection of things which have little or no value in themselves but only in the total amount one claims possession of. We buy and consume stuff because we want to have more than our neighbors. We define ourselves by comparing our stuff to the stuff of others. There was once a bumper sticker that said 'he who has most toys when he dies, wins'. Accumulating stuff can become the goal of one's life: and that is a disease of the spirit. We know at some elemental level that just getting stuffed with stuff is a

meaningless pursuit and brings no real enduring joy. If our identity is measured by comparison to the accumulations of others that is a rat race only rats can win. But once we enter a comparative race to hoard and pile up more and more stuff we can't help but then consider other persons as enemies, as foes we have to out run and out collect. They become our rivals with whom we always have to be on the lookout because they might take something from us or keep us from getting more at their expense. And so we come to believe there is a scarcity of stuff and we should get as much as we can in the shortest amount of time possible in whatever way our privileges allow us to. This is an epidemic of affluenza running rampant in our lives and in our communities. But as we all know, the more food we stuff into ourselves the more damage we do to our bodies. The epidemic of obesity is due to our stuffing ourselves with stuff that destroys our biological health.

The same is true with much of the non-food stuff we seem to crave. Why do we consume so much that is simply not essential for our lives? Because there is a spiritual vacuum or emptiness in our souls which we think we can fill by purchasing and consuming more material things, by accumulating more financial wealth. More and more scholars are telling us, however, that the more we consume the less happy we are. Happiness, as anyone who has been steeped in the teachings of our faith knows, is never

achieved by the consumption of mere stuff. It's achieved only in and through the spiritual feeding we get from God and the other members of our community.

Now, you're probably wondering what all this stuff about stuff has to do with our scripture readings this morning. Is it nothing more than stuff and nonsense? But recall the lines from the gospel: When Jesus looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." Philip is calling attention to the problem of getting the right stuff in the right amounts to feed the people who have come to hear Jesus whose teachings contained great stuff for those with ears to hear it. Philip is fearful that there is not enough bread to feed the multitudes and what little was available was too costly: it would take six months wages to even give them a little. But Jesus was undeterred: he first gave thanks to God for the loaves and fishes and then distributed them until everyone was satisfied. He did this for the simple reason that he trusted God to satisfy the people in those things that truly matter. Jesus broke through the mental obstacle that insists that it is up to us to grab enough stuff from the ever diminishing pile of goods to keep us well-fed and happy. Jesus exposes the fact that our fear of not having enough is based on the false belief that there is only a limited amount of good stuff out there and that

God wants us to outcompete others to get our hands on it. There is an equally false belief that God can't be trusted to give us what we need (not what we want) in due time and in good order. The gospel story, however, reminds us that with God and through God there is never a lack of what we truly need; that whatever stuff is needed for living authentic and full lives, God will provide us. Our challenge is not to get stuffed with meaningless stuff but to live as stewards of the stuff we have already been given. If in the name of justice we distribute that stuff to those in need from the affluence we have already attained, we can trust God to see to it that there will be an abundant and ever replenishing supply of those things necessary to a healthy and fulfilling life both materially and spiritually. We need to escape from the pernicious and ultimately fatal obsession with beating others to the ever diminishing stock of material goods we have produced. Make no mistake about it: there are forces at work in the world about us that want us to think that we are in a competition with hostile and antagonistic rivals for what's left in the depleting piles of meaningless stuff by which we define ourselves. These forces would have encouraged those gathering to hear Jesus to rush the scarce platters of food and grab all they could before others get there ahead of them. But Jesus calmly and in the full knowledge of the truth that with God there is no scarcity of the good things of life, simply let

what was available be enough for all who were fed to satisfaction. This truth is one that can guide our lives and our choices as we decide what we truly need and how we can supply those same things, all the good stuff, to all our brothers and sisters.