

How Much?
A Sermon by the Very Rev'd Timothy Jones
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
October 22, 2017
Matthew 22:15-22

How much stuff do you need to be happy?

How much is enough?

I know I was thinking about that at least as early as when I was in high school. I know that because

I recall an assignment for my high school

American literature class.

We read the book, *Walden*, the story penned by nineteenth-century New England essayist Henry

David Thoreau. Thoreau spent two year on Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, and

wrote about it.

Ever since, Thoreau has been known for his love of nature and his experiments with simple living.

When Jill and I got in the car three weeks ago for a trip to New England and back

to see our son and his family who live near Boston, I realized we could easily make the 45-minute drive to Concord, and see Walden: the lake, even the cabin (well, a replica, anyway).

And there were plenty of pilgrims and tourists, as you'd imagine for a place so romanticized, more than 150 years after Thoreau wrote the book detailing his observations from those two years.

It was a bit commercialized, too. There was a fancy gift shop at Walden, in a kind of irony, given Thoreau's concerns about commercialism and consumption.

But I loved it all, and I bought a new edition of *Walden*, and I'm re-reading it.

I was, as a high-schooler,
And now once again as a full-grown adult,
intrigued by a curious man who determined he would live by a lake with only bare essentials:

A bed, a table that doubled as a desk, a chair, a fireplace that provided warmth as well as the means to prepare meals.

Thoreau dared to live a simple life to concentrate on other things. “I went to the woods,” he wrote in *Walden*, “because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

Sometimes you clear out the clutter or put down your smartphone or look out the window or go for a walk to get more alert and attentive to the glories of the created, natural world.

While it was drastic, more than I’ll wager any of us will attempt, there was something dramatic, appealing, and daring in what Thoreau did. His experiment has the feel of an adventure. That’s why we still read his account. Even more than the love of nature, that’s what fired my imagination as a teenager.

We long wistfully, some days, for the kind of
simplicity he achieved.

Because sometimes, at least,

We suspect that we have missed something
essential. We long for something more satisfying
than our sophisticated gadgets and shiny signs of
affluence.

And we wonder if we have too much stuff.
Or worry. A survey some years ago found that 82
percent of Americans agreed “that most of us buy
and consume far more than we need, and 86
percent said our children were ‘too focused on
buying and consuming things.’”

Because if there’s a consistent answer to how
much we need in most of the marketing we
subject ourselves to,
it’s this: *More*. Always more.

You need more than you have. Always.

I think of the tongue-in-cheek Rubbermaid
commercial from a while ago.

“From the day I was born,”
a woman is saying in the opening scene,
“I collected so much.” After a couple more
scenes, you finally see her and her family mope
around in a house where every possible surface is
covered with possessions.

“So we stowed our stuff in stuff from
Rubbermaid,” she says, all perky, as she
demonstrates every kind of Rubbermaid bin and
box you can imagine.

She makes the house so neat it’s almost bare,
except for piled plastic storage boxes full of gear.

The wife and mother comes on again,
Surrounded by her family,
She concludes,
“Then we were so unstuffed—“
“Hey!” they all suddenly say with a sudden glee,

“we need *more* stuff!” The family happily runs for the door, practically waving their hands in air, free now to buy and bring home even more.

What is our relationship to our possessions?

How do we throw off everything that *hinders* and the *sin* that so easily *entangles*, in the words of our stewardship theme verses.

You know, Jesus spent five times more time talking about our relationship to possessions than he did about prayer.

Today’s reading is an example.
The religious leaders in Jesus’ time knew that money can be confusing,
Our possessions distracting,
Our sorting out their place fraught with issues.

In the first century, Rome conquered nation after nation and where it conquered it levied taxes.

There were three kinds of taxes:
a “ground tax,” which taxed a person’s property
and everything it produced:
grain, olive oil, wine. There was an “income tax.”
And a “poll tax.” A poll tax was essentially
a tax for existing. Everyone from teenagers
to senior citizens had to pay the poll tax.

The Jews hated the taxes of the Romans.

It wasn’t just the financial burden
they imposed; Roman taxation galled the
Pharisees because it meant supporting a pagan
government.

And it was just the issue
the Pharisees were looking for
to discredit Jesus.

They “plotted to entrap him,”
Matthew tells us in an ominous note.
With diabolical cleverness, they reached out

to the Herodians for help. The Herodians were those officials who were loyal to King Herod, a kind of puppet king for the Romans.

The Pharisees and the Herodians were normally enemies.

The Herodians saw As a man was capable of firing up the crowds and leading a revolt against Herod and Rome.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, were fervent nationalists who wanted Rome out of Israel.

But here the two groups join forces against Jesus.

Together they approach him when he was teaching.

Pretending to flatter him, they asked his help.

Jesus, is it right to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?

It was a great question – brilliant even.

If he answered “Yes,”
the Pharisees could accuse him
of being weak on paganism.
They could use that charge
to turn people against him.

If he answered
“No, it’s not right”
the Herodians would
report him to the Roman authorities.
Either way it was a lose-lose for Jesus.

Well, it wasn’t just that Jesus was clever in his
answer; it’s more that Jesus wasn’t interested in
the way they framed it.

He was concerned about how we find a right
relationship not only to taxes, but to money.
So I love the way Jesus in a matter-of-fact way
called for a denarius, the amount of the poll tax,
the tax one had to pay for existing.

On the front of the denarius
was a portrait of the Emperor Tiberius.

“Whose head is this?” Jesus asked them.

“The Emperor’s,” they replied

“Then give the Emperor what is his,” Jesus
responded. But give God what is his.

Instead of falling into their trap,
Instead of letting their obsessions obscure the
bigger issues of a truly rich, God-centered life,
he simply seems to say,
Get on with what it means to be faithful.

The question is not how much tax we should pay,
but what do we do with this world God has made?
And how do we hold our pieces of it more lightly,
knowing that everything
in the world comes from him?
How do we do that when ultimately our goal is to
give back to God all we are and all we have.

And that’s where things get exciting, become an
adventure. And the grasp on us of our many
things loosen.

When Jill and I got married, we sat down to do
our first budget together.

I still had a year left of seminary,
and money was tight.

We were trying to make it work.

And Jill said, well, of course we need to tithe.

That is, give ten percent to the church.

I said, uh, what? How much?

I had always thought in terms of, well, an amount,
whatever amount seemed comfortable—
not a percentage.

Certainly not a tithe.

But it was hard to argue with.

I mean, I knew the tithe, the ten percent,
was considered the standard practice in the Bible
and Christian tradition.

I also knew that when we began the year,
and columned up budgeted expenses versus
income, the expenses won out.

That was *before* we factored in a tithe.

But Jill was so matter-of-fact about it,
so convinced that, as Malachi says,
God will bless and honor those who honor him,
that, well, sure. *How could I argue?*

So we did do with less that year.
But you know what, As scary as it was, it had the
feel of an adventure. We were more aware of our
blessings. More alert and grateful.

It was a great year, by the way.
More than an experiment, what we tried enriched
our lives, that year, as it has in the years since.

I don't have a prescription for you today, for how
much you need. How much you should give.
(Though I'd like you at least to think in terms of
the percentage of your income it represents).

And I do know that a full life doesn't need as
much as the marketers constantly tell us.

And I know that experimenting, daring new
patterns, making our relationship to our
possessions a matter of earnest prayer
can lead to a new richness.
It can lead even to the joy of a true adventure.