

## **The Things We Need to Leave Behind**

Rev. John Allen

Marie Kondo is having quite a cultural moment. She is a now world-famous expert in home tidying. The author of the bestselling “The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying up” and now the star of the Netflix original, *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo*, in which she goes into people’s homes and helps them bring order to the chaos.

At the heart of Marie Kondo’s method is the idea that we should not hold onto objects that are no longer useful to us, objects that, when we hold them do not “spark joy.”

Molli and I have done a version of this in our own home recently, donating several bags of clothing, and a trunkful of books. Sifting through old papers that pile up. Dumping out the drawers full of junk and organizing only what we need to keep.

And I have to tell you, there is a noticeable psychological lift that I felt as our home grew lighter and less cluttered.

One of the things that I found most freeing was getting rid of things that were really the stuff of someone I thought I would be, but never became. The left-aside trappings of the hobbies I didn't stick with. The clothes that I thought one day would feel like my style. The books I swore I would read.

Because now, what is left in my life, are the things that remind me who I am, and the things that help me live the life that God is calling me to live today.

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Simon and his fellow fishermen had just had an incredibly frustrating evening. Fishing was a nighttime activity on the sea of Galilee, and last night had been a total bust. They were scrubbing their nets clean on the lakeshore when a man walked up and asked to borrow their boat.

There was an enormous crowd crushing in behind him, and he needed to use the boat to get a little ways off shore so that everyone could hear him.

Who knows why, but Simon agreed, and rowed him out just off shore so that he could speak.

When the talk was over, he surprised Simon, instead of asking to be taken back to shore, he told him to push out into the deep water and let down his nets one more time.

Have you ever been asked to try something one more time after you have already been over the brink of frustration, after you had already felt the slight relief that comes with just giving up. Then you know how Simon felt.

Who knows why, but Simon agreed. He pushed out into the deep water, let down his nets, and the nets started to strain and break under the weight of the catch.

So they called for help from the others, and they came out as fast as they could to wrestle the abundance into their small boats, which began to sink beneath the weight and Simon saw now that this was no ordinary man and said.

“Get away from me, I am a sinful man. You don’t want me.”

Have you ever felt unworthy? On the receiving end of a gift of grace or love, a bounty beyond what you could ever deserve or earn? Did you ever feel so unworthy that you prayed for the gifts to stop coming, so that you wouldn’t have to feel guilty about it anymore? Then you know how Simon felt.

But Jesus was having none of it, “Do not be afraid” Jesus said to Simon. As he would say to so, so, so, many others who were knocked to their knees by the beauty of his love.

“Do not be afraid. Come. Follow me.”

And who knows why, but Simon agreed, without a word he walked away, leaving everything by the shore of the lake, he didn't finish washing the nets. He didn't even make sure the boat was tied up securely. He didn't even bring the fish. He just walked away.

There is no doubt that Jesus' supernatural qualities are on full display with that teeming swarm of fish, but I think the most miraculous thing that happens in this story is when Simon walks away from his whole life to follow Jesus.

He doesn't pack the nets in the basement in case he will need them again someday. He knows somehow in that moment that his life is different, and so he just leaves those things behind.

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Adding new things to our lives is almost always exhilarating and fun.

But there are things we need to leave behind.

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A few weeks ago, several of us from this church gathered for a morning study group. We were watching a short video by a UCC Minister named Lillian Daniel, in the video she was talking some about why she felt organized religious community was so important.

In that video she said: “I like to think that church doesn’t just meet my needs. Church changes my needs.”

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Which is to say, that when we become a follower of Jesus, when we live the life of faith, it is not just something that we can add onto our life and leave the rest the same.

Faith will not leave the other corners of our lives untouched.

It may be tempting to feel like your life has almost everything you need, and there are just a few pieces missing. A piece of prayer. A piece of community. A piece of stillness.

And it would be tempting to think that we could come to church simply as a way to fill those last few needs. That a spiritual life is something that we could simply add onto everything else we already do, everything we already value, every way we already spend our money, every way we already spend our time.

But being here should not just meet the needs you had when you walk in the door, it should change what you feel you need.

And so you will find, I believe, that the message of Jesus, and the unconditional love of God we seek and find in our tradition, will point you toward some things that you need to leave behind.

Maybe it is a bad habit that you realize does not have a place in your life anymore.

Or maybe God will show you that the way of operating at work that has gotten you this far is not compatible with your identity as a person of faith.

Maybe God is tugging your heart toward living a bit more simply, and a bit more generously.

Perhaps God does not want you to hold onto that anger for another moment.

Or maybe, like Simon, God will tap you on the shoulder with some extraordinary invitation, that costs you so much of what you have known.

Who knows, but here is what I do know.

We are so inclined to feel that our needs will be met if we can just find the right thing to add to our life.

But what if what you need to do is leave something behind.

Several years ago, I came to a moment in my life when I was feeling so overwhelmed with responsibilities. I was graduate student and I had this eagerness and this hope that was souring into paralysis and despair, I was itchy just learning all the time, I wanted to change the world, I wanted to do something that mattered.

And so I took a small job at a church, and I took overnight shifts at a neighborhood ambulance company, and then I took on a job in my seminary chapel, and another job organizing a lecture series, I would take the train 2 hours out into the middle of New Jersey to guest preach at suburban churches, I was trying to find my way as an activist supporting tenants in New York who were in danger of eviction... and.. and..

And no matter how many things I added to my life, the world wasn't changing the way I wanted it to, and I wasn't feeling any more fulfilled. Just exhausted.

And then I knew just what I needed, and so one night I was standing alone in a stationary store pouring over every planner on the shelf, because I knew that if I just found the right one, and bought *that*. Then, then my life would be the way I wanted it to be.

But of course it wasn't.

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But what if you just need to leave something behind?

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Who knows why Simon walked away from his boats to follow Christ.

I don't know. But I have an idea.

I think something changed in that moment when the boats are sinking into the lake under the weight of the catch and Simon falls to the deck cries out: "leave me Lord, I am sinful man."

I think that in that moment Simon must have known that this man who could bring swarms fish out of a lake which all night had been barren, surely knew how true that statement was. Surely he knew just how bad, just how unworthy, just how flawed and broken he was.

And yet he looked up, and Jesus love had not even blinked. When he looked up and couldn't detect a hint of guarded judgment behind his eyes.

That is when Simon knew that he was done with fishing.

That is, incidentally. why the one thing that never fails to make me angry is Christians who have pre-determined types of people who they will not love like that.

We are surely meant to feel this love for ourselves.

But we are also certainly meant to offer it to others, without condition.

For that love that Simon felt, is what each one of us hungers for at our very core.

And that love did not leave any part of him unchanged. It touched every corner. It realigned his values. It reshaped his priorities.

And it was that moment that Simon realized that what he was searching for was not at the bottom of the lake, he could never buy it no matter how big the catch, he could never earn it no matter how pious or good he was.

It was just there.

It is just there.

That unblinking, unwavering love of God for you. For all people. For all creation.

You can't earn it. You can't plan for it. You can't capture it. You certainly cannot hoard it for yourself.

It is just there.

God just loves you.

And that love is so powerful that when you encounter it, there are somethings that get left behind.

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What if everything you need is actually already here.

What if Jesus is not pointing you toward one more thing.

What if he is just standing there, offering his hand, as if to say, it's ok, do not be afraid, I am with you. You can leave that right there. Come. Follow me.