

She certainly wasn't in danger of running out of cat food anytime soon. The extreme couponer on the extreme couponing TV show was proudly showing off her massive stockpile -- a stockpile purchased for pennies on the dollar, a stockpile made possible through aggressive couponing, a stockpile that included (among other things) at least a dozen bags of dry cat food. It was impressive... but also a little bit bizarre. Why bizarre? Because the couponer admitted: "I don't even have a cat!" (Apparently she was planning to donate the haul to a local animal shelter.)

Maybe it doesn't make a whole lot of sense to stock up on pet supplies if you don't have a pet. Maybe it doesn't make sense to hold on to anything if you don't have a use for it. Maybe it doesn't make sense... but then, maybe it does.

I was thinking about that this week, this second week of our "brown bag" sermon series. Throughout the weeks following Easter, it has become a bit of a tradition of mine to offer "sermons from a brown bag," sermons inspired by the random items supplied by so many of you. I've preached on some strange items over the years... but every time, I've managed to find some kind of gospel message there in this random stuff. That's why I do it, really... because I believe the resurrection changes everything, and that everything (literally, every *thing*) has the capacity to teach us something about the good news.

This week's item comes courtesy of Doug Jantzi, and it's this: a ceramic horse head ashtray. (Why do I keep doing this "brown bag" thing to myself?) A ceramic horse head ashtray. It is the very definition of an item I have no use for. I don't smoke. I've never smoked. (If you do smoke, no judgements here, but I hope you'll quit. We both know it's really bad for you... and frankly, I'm the one who ends up having to officiate your funeral and I'd like to put that off as long as possible, if it's all the same to you.) I've

never owned an ashtray, because I have never smoked.

But then Doug told me something fascinating about this particular ashtray. He told me it once belonged to his husband Bob's parents... and that *they* never smoked, either. They never smoked, and yet here I am holding their ashtray. It seemed strange to me (kind of like buying cat food if you don't have a cat)... but then Doug shared something *else* fascinating about ashtrays: apparently (once upon a time, and not so long ago), the polite and hospitable and socially-appropriate thing to do, even if you didn't smoke yourself, was to have an ashtray available for your guests in the event that *they* smoked. It was something you provided for others, even if you didn't need it yourself. While I can't get behind smoking itself, I can get behind that.

And I'm not the only one. I think the apostle Paul can get behind that, too. In fact, I'm sure of it, because he says so in our scripture reading for today, in this ancient letter to his beloved Philippian church. Hear the opening verses again:

[Philippians 2:1-4, NIV]

<sup>1</sup> If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, <sup>2</sup> then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

*Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.* That's how it appears in the NIV translation... and in the NRSV, the language is even stronger: "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4, NRSV). There's a little discrepancy there that leaves some gray

area, some room for interpretation. Was Paul encouraging these early Christ-followers to look to the needs of others *instead* of their own? Or in *addition* to their own? It's hard to say. The difference is a matter of Greek translation and good scholarly guesswork, so it's hard to say which is "right" or which meaning Paul intended. Either way, though, the passage calls God's people to something that is frankly a bit counter-intuitive and countercultural: looking out for something *other* than Number One.

"Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4, NRSV). That sounds good, and quotable, and like the kind of thing you'd put on one of those Christian Verse-A-Day desk calendars (gotta love Christian merch)... but what does it look like in practical terms, in everyday life? Paul's not specific on what it means to look to the interests of others, which is both frustrating and freeing. It's frustrating, because we can always use a bit more direction (history has shown that when left to our own devices, we don't always settle on the best and most righteous interpretations of scripture). Yet it's also freeing, because we have the opportunity to use our God-given brains and Spirit-filled hearts to fill in the blanks in ways that fit our lives and context.

So what does it look like to look to the interests of others here in Bethlehem (or wherever you are), here in the US (or wherever you are), here in the month of April (or whenever you're tuning in to this recording), here in this season of COVID-tide (or whenever it is, if you're lucky enough to be viewing this post-COVID)? What does it look like?

I don't know... maybe it looks like: speaking up about the growing reality of "food deserts" in our city, even if you don't live in one. Maybe it looks like helping other

people schedule vaccine appointments, even if you've already received yours. Maybe it looks like educating yourself on others' experiences of systemic racism in our culture, even if you've never shared those experiences or you've never been aware of those experiences. Maybe it looks like volunteering to be a Sunday School teacher or youth group volunteer, even if you don't have kids. Maybe it looks like working to make our church more accessible to those who are differently-abled, even if you have no problem accessing the space. Maybe it looks like advocating for clean water throughout our country and world, even if the water in your tap is a-okay. In this critical stage of COVID-tide, maybe it looks like being mindful about COVID mitigations, even if you're not at particular risk. On this Native American Ministries Sunday, maybe it looks like advocating for the rights and dignity of First Peoples, even if you're not one of them. In this spring season, maybe it looks like growing produce to donate to the food pantry, even if you've never had trouble playing for your groceries.

Maybe it looks like some of these things. Maybe it looks like something else altogether. But I think it always looks like using your position, or your privilege, or your resources, or your time (whatever you *do* have) to advocate for things that are important, even (and especially) if they don't directly impact you. I think it always looks like God grace working through you. I think it always looks like a justice-oriented, compassion-grounded, others-focused point of view. "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4, NRSV).

It might be worth noting that Paul's letter doesn't end there. It keeps going. "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:4-5, NRSV). From time to time,

people ask me what kind of difference Christ has made in my life -- probably because I'm a pastor and even more so now that I'm a televangelist. I don't have the dramatic I-hit-rock-bottom-and-then-I-saw-the-light kind of testimony. Mine is quieter, more gradual, I suppose. So there are a lot of ways that I could answer that question... but one of the most important? It comes back to this stuff. It comes back to "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:4-5, NRSV). Because I follow Christ, I care about things that I have no good reason to care about. That is the love of Christ, the power of Christ, working in me. On my own? I'm just not that justice-oriented, that compassion-grounded, that others-focused. On my own, I'm just not that nice or that good. (Thought I was, just because I'm a pastor? Boy, did I fool you!) Left to my own devices, I'm probably as selfish and self-focused as anyone (perhaps even more). The justice and compassion and concern for the needs of others ahead of my own? I take zero credit. That's the mind of Christ in me.

I've heard it said that you can tell the character of people based on how they treat someone who is of no use to them. That may be true. It certainly sounds pretty good. I wonder if you can tell the character of people based on how much they care about, and work toward, and advocate for things that will never impact or benefit them directly. I wonder if that's the life Paul intends for the Philippians, and for us. I wonder if that's what it looks like to have the "same mind" in you that was in Christ Jesus.

So let's let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus. Let's look to the needs of others and work for the benefit of others. Let's care about the things we have no good reason to care about -- no good reason other than Christ, that is. Let's let God work in

us, making us more justice-oriented, more compassion-grounded, more others-focused.

And even while I urge you not to smoke, let's "put out the ashtray," so to speak, whether we ourselves need it or not.