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Message

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In 1995, I had some frequent flyer miles that I needed to use or I'd lose them, they'd expire. They were from my many trips from volunteering in Central America, and since those weren't vacation trips I thought, *h-m-m-m, what will I do with these miles?* Well, I happened to talk with Mickey Williamson and her partner Penny. Mickey had been an active member of CCC before they moved, as some of you might recall. Well, Mickey and Penny had biked in Ireland for several years and loved it – the people, the green rolling hills, the food (not so much the food). So I decided: *That's it! I'm going to ride a bike from the east coast to the west coast of Ireland.* But first I needed to buy a bike. So I did, and a month later I had my bike boxed up and off I went on my big adventure. When I got there, I found that when they'd boxed my bike, they'd taken it apart, and it was now in what felt like a million pieces. I'm standing at the bus stop where I'd gotten off, thinking *oh my God what am I going to do?* The next thing I know, three young people approach me, tell me there's a bike shop down the road, and they pick up the pieces, and like a parade of angels, they head down the street to the bike shop. It was amazing, and it turned out to be an adventure in which I continued to feel surrounded by angels. You know I'm half Irish, and you know how the Irish are with stories, so I have to share one more story about that adventure.

As I rode in Ireland, I felt it was important to stay hydrated and get my carbohydrates, so I stopped for a Guinness each afternoon. One day I found a tiny, ancient-looking pub at a crossroad, not even a village. There was a little lady sweeping her doorstep with her sheep dog faithfully watching her, and when I asked her about the pub she said it was closed until the evening, but then she said "Won't you come in for a cup of tea, dear?" So I went in and she had this huge hearth with a fire going, where she cooked her food, and she made me tea, which is like a miracle tea, because I don't normally like tea, but this was delicious. We talked of America, 'cause everyone in Ireland has relatives in America; then we talk of San Francisco, and then she said she knows two women in San Francisco, and they ride their bikes in Ireland. One's a teacher, the other a minister, and I ask to her, "Are their names Mickey Williamson and Penny?" "Yes," she says. My two friends who inspired my great adventure across Ireland had also by happenchance met this tiny, lovely woman at the

crossroad. It was a trip filled with angels, and it was my bike, my sturdy blue Trek bike, that carried me through this adventure (and carried me through many more adventures).

I'm contemplating a new adventure – nothing like the Ireland trip, but one that requires a bike. So I brought my now twenty-one-year-old bike in for a tune-up. It was suggested I get a new bike, and so I did, I bought a new bike. And I can't tell you how sorry I was shortly afterwards because, while the new one is OK, I found myself clinging to my old bike, clinging to my companion of so many adventures. But there is more to the story than that, because I was welling up in tears thinking of parting with my old bike. And I asked myself *What am I clinging to? What is it about my bike that I am so emotionally attached to it?* I realized it was not just the memories of the adventures I had had on it; it was that I was clinging to a younger time in my life, a time when I was stronger, more energetic and filled with confidence in my youth and strength, when I thought that if I just did everything right, that my strength and energy would last forever. And so I had to ask myself, *does this clinging really serve me?*

In today's scripture the man in the parable is also clinging. This fellow is both rich and lucky, because his fields have produced so much he can't store it all. So what does he do? He tears down his barns and builds larger ones. And he says to himself "I will say to my soul, Soul, I have ample goods! Now I'll relax, and eat, and drink, and be merry." He's got it all! Until what happens? Jesus says (and this parable is considered one of the most authentic parables told by Jesus, while some are a little more embellished than others) that God says, "You fool! Your life will be demanded back from you this very night." Wow! His goose is cooked! This is harsh. What's this about?

This guy wasn't doing anything really wrong. He didn't gain his wealth illegally or by taking advantage of people. He's making reasonable plans about how to save his incredible fortune and then he'll eat and drink and rest and be merry. This man of ancient times brought to my mind sports figures, lottery winners, and the Charlie Sheens of the world who suddenly find themselves with great fortunes, and then their lives fall apart. There is a dynamic here that I think is this fellow's undoing: he is clinging to his possessions, and clinging as if they will give him security forever. He is thinking that all is well and will always be well because of his material riches, and as if those riches will equate to complete happiness and fulfillment.

As I read and re-read this passage, what I saw in my mind's eye was my bike, and I heard the thought that *if I just keep doing the right things, I will be strong and energetic forever*. And God says to this fellow "No way. Clinging to those riches (and that bike) guarantees us nothing."

I think this dynamic of clinging is part of the human condition, and it has led me to ask *what else do we cling to in ways that don't serve us?* What else? Let me share this number with you that I thought was interesting. In the United States we have 2,630,000,000 square feet of rented storage units for our possessions, and that's in addition to our homes! We like our possessions.

But what else? What about clinging to people? Do we sometimes cling to people in ways that don't serve us? Can you think of a time in your younger years, perhaps when you were clinging passionately to a man or woman who was not in your best interest to be with? I can think of a time or two, but alas, I will not share those stories, given that my husband is with us this morning.

What else to we cling to? Past hurts? Habits that no longer serve us? Expectations of others? How about misconceptions about ourselves of being less than, not good enough, or too much of? I dare say it is a question to ask ourselves occasionally and then to reflect "Does this clinging still serve me and our human family?"

Our church has been launched into a new chapter with Curran moving on. I think we've wanted to cling to Curran over the last three months since we heard the news. There's so much about her to want to cling to. And I think she'd be the first person so say "Nope! Ya don't get to do that! Ya don't get to cling, because it will not serve your community." Grieve, yes, we are grieving, and we'll enjoy our memories together, but no clinging.

So going back to our poor fellow in Jesus' parable, what could he have done differently? There are some obvious things, but looking closely at this parable, you see a lot of the pronouns "I" and "my": I have, I will, I do, my crops, my barns, my grain, my goods. There is not one time this fellow utters the word "we." That is rather striking! Our community knows about *we*, like when we gave that wonderful send-off to Curran, like how we share our time and energy and caring with each other and our extended human family. I spoke with Patricia Robinson's sweetheart Jim the other night, and he talked about how supportive and caring our community was as Patricia was making her transition. He shared that thought with me

more than once over the last several months of her life. We are very good at *we-ness*. *We-ness* is actually a word from Victor Frankel, usually used to refer to couples in therapy. But I'm going to expand on it this morning because I suspect that if the fellow in the story had planned to use his abundance for the *we* of his community instead of the *I*, the end of the story might have been quite different.

Where do we find experiences of *we-ness* beyond CCC in this world that, right now, feels so fragmented, so divided and divisive? Those experiences do exist. Consider nine-year-old Tyler Fugett, who went to a county sheriff's office with more than 100 books to give to the inmates. He saved up his allowance to buy the books at clearance sales, and thrifty little fellow that he is, he's hoping they'll help the inmates find a new way forward. There's a lot *we-ness* in that story, and if there's any clinging, it is Tyler's clinging to hope.

Or consider Mary, a former dress shop owner, who started gardening with a few children from her neighborhood. Three years later her wish to help a few neighborhood children resulted in her creating a gardening co-op that gives nearly 2,000 people access to fresh vegetables and fruit, in an area that was previously a food desert. No clinging here, and lots of *we-ness*.

But *we-ness* can come in simple, everyday forms, right? Sitting in a line of traffic, we let someone into our lane, with a wave and a smile rather than a snarl. That's sometimes a hard one for me. Like Curran, my dear mother used to stop her car any time she saw a woman walking with groceries and offer her a ride. *We-ness* can look like strangers picking up bicycle parts for a stranded woman and walking them to a bike store. And *we-ness* will happen when I stop clinging to my old blue Trek bike and everything associated with it, and give it away, pass it on, to one of the many immigrants I see daily in the Canal area, to someone who in this political atmosphere is left feeling outside of the *we-ness* of our society.

I think there is a lot of *we-ness* in our world today. Sometimes we have to look for it very intentionally. More important is that we *create* it. Because where there is *we-ness*, there is no clinging. And that, my friends, is where God's love is embodied, where it is shared and where it flourishes.

Amen