

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Taking Inventory"
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A way back in the last century, I used to work with my Dad in his camera store. This was in a time long ago when they used to put this kind of tape into the camera called "film." I learned a lot in the retail business. I learned that the new young guy got to do a lot of dusting and sweeping and things somewhat unrelated to selling cameras and camera accessories, now called peripherals.

I also learned that whether you liked it or not, you had to take inventory at least once a year to see what was exactly in the store, both for tax purposes as well as for just knowing what was there. I suppose some stores, at least some of the family business smaller stores could simply fudge their numbers and put down what they thought they might have. But a real inventory is a painstakingly long process where we count every object and take down every item number (long before bar codes and the like and scanners), and you write them all down, one by one.

For many of us, we need to do the same with our lives, with our spiritual lives. And Sunday by Sunday, I try to take us to a place we can count up what's going on in each one of us, reason out where our time is going, wonder to ourselves whether we are spending our time and energy and resources in the direction that most lines up with what we say is important to us. Now I say "us," but certainly am thinking of myself as I realize more and more that I don't spend my time often in a way that lines up with my stated values. And yes, this makes me a hypocrite, that is, a person whose values, words and actions don't line up the way they should. But it also reminds me that we are all like this. Tell me if you think otherwise.

So every Sunday is a chance to take a little spiritual inventory of ourselves. And hopefully at Sunday dinner, you can discuss your inventory with those close to you; or at least sometime during the day with a close friend or family member. This is a good part of the whole Lord's Day experience.

Now Jeremiah asks us to take the inventory as if we were watching God make pottery. He reminds us we are God's workmanship, made with God's loving hands, his pottery. He wants us to value our time, our energy, our

limited resources in this limited life before the unlimited one comes into being. He wants us to turn from our rebellion and sinful ways and choose God's ways. He wants us to be soft in His hands before we are fired in the many trials that come our way in this life. The inventory question is: Am I soft to receiving God's ways and teaching, or am I fixed in the way I already am?

David, the song writer of Psalm 139, reflects on his life and on God's part in his life. God's part in his life is all pervasive, as he thinks about it. David sings about how God knew him before he knew himself. He sings about the fact that God's inventory of him is complete, physically, emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, socially, day in, day out, wise decisions, mistakes, detestable things, wonderful things, all about me. God knows me as a book that's already been written, yet still loves me. David says he can't even begin to inventory God's thoughts because it would be like an inventory of all the grains of sand on all the beaches of the world, and that would be just a start. And even though we have started the terabyte information storage devices, that is, a thousand times a thousand times a thousand times a thousand times a thousand bits of information, we still don't approach God's knowledge of us nor of our bodies nor our spirits. David asks us the inventory question: How do I include God in my decision making processes, include Him in my values discovery process or in simply getting to know who I am before my death.

Paul writes a short letter to Philemon, whose run away slave Onesimus has helped Paul and become a Christian. He encourages Philemon in his faith, as a person who refreshes the believers around him (v. 7). Paul asks Philemon to know longer treat Onesimus as a useless runaway slave, but as useful and even an equal, at least a brother in the Lord. Paul challenges the social standing of the day in being so bold. Paul asks us the inventory question: What one encouraging thing can I take into myself to become more like what God wants me to be?

Jesus takes us to the ultimate place of inventory. In the 12 step programs, there is also inventory to be taken. This is the fourth step, where we take a fearless, moral inventory of ourselves. In this step, we look at resentments against others. On our grudge list, we set opposite each name our injuries. Was it our self-esteem, our security, our ambitions, our personal, or sexual relations which had been interfered with? Many intimate questions are asked in this fourth step.

Jesus in Luke 14: 25 – 33, takes us to his spiritual inventory with strong challenges. He brings two commands and three parables. He realizes that large crowds are following him as a kind of “rock star” of the day. Many were going along with crowd. So he became as challenging as challenging can be.

What if my family doesn't like what you are saying? Then what, Jesus? Then, Jesus says, you have to choose between me and your family. He knew that family had the highest value of the day, just as it is for many here today. Yet he called people to count the cost of following him, not just for a good time or for a great holiday.

He calls us all to consider what we have gotten ourselves into, if we indeed consider ourselves followers of him, which all Christians are called to be. So he tells three stories. The first is a word picture story: If you don't take up your cross and follow me, you can't come along. Now we know the cross was an instrument of being tortured to death in that day. The cross is the noose, the guillotine, the gas chamber of that day. It is a call to complete and utter commitment to Jesus. Such a commitment is huge and superlatives fail me to describe it. The inventory question: How important is the Christian faith in my life? How does my life show this in word and deed?

The second story is about a guy who wanted to build a tower. Now the best way to retell this story is to talk to you about Kimberley, BC in the mountains in Eastern BC somewhat near the Alberta border. This town has taken up a tourism theme of making itself a Bavarian village, with a lovely skiing environment. But that's not what I want to talk to you about. There's a small Presbyterian church in the downtown core, and across the street from it is the remnants of a city block of older buildings. These buildings were torn down to the ground so that a new set of buildings could be built. But here's the problem: They were torn down, but new buildings were never built. I know that in the late 1990s there was nothing but the concrete on the ground, and a construction fence around it for at least ten years. So whoever made the decision to buy the land and raise the buildings did so without planning how much it would cost to rebuild on the site. All that was there was the embarrassing work site, an eye sore with no apparent redeemable value. Jesus says, don't let your faith be like that unfinished work site that has become an eye sore, just as many abandoned buildings have become the same in our downtown.

Count the cost of building your faith and trust in God. Count the cost by investing that faith and have the courage to face the fact we all need some rebuilding, some renovation, some change in our lives in God's direction. I know I do. The inventory question is: How much of your life and resources have you given over to the care and provision of God? Is your Christianity more like a patch on your coat, or inside you and in your very skin and clothes?

And the third story Jesus told was about a king who had vast resources, who even had an army and was looking to expand his kingdom. But unfortunately, he did not have the intelligence, military or otherwise to notice that his neighboring king had an army with 20,000 soldiers. So when he went out to battle prematurely, what should he do? Rather than seeing his kingdom wiped out, rather than expanded, he would send his best diplomats to make peace and give away a little rather than losing it all.

We are all kings and queens of our own vast resources of time, money, energy, and creativity. Jesus encourages us to use things wisely for his ways and will. He says directly as the second command in verse 33. He wants the keys to the car, to the apartment, to the cottage, to the house, to the other machines, to the office and as we give them over, he gives them back and encourages us to remember the true Owner.

This is the ultimate inventory. It can be painful. It can be fulfilling. But as we give back ourselves and our lives to the One who gave us Life itself, we have made the wisest of choices.

Let us do so again today, even now.

Let us pray.