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Saint James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

One thing every journalist has to know how to do  
is to write an obituary.  
Often, it's the first assignment a young newspaper reporter is given.  
Lord knows I've written my share of them.

A good obituary captures the essence of the deceased.  
It's more than just a rote listing of survivors,  
of where the dead person went to school,  
and what that person did for a living,  
and what clubs he or she belonged to.  
Yes, all that should be in there,  
but the best obituaries are also able to nail down,  
in just a few hundred words,  
what made a person tick.  
It includes telling little details  
that peel away the veneer  
and reveal the person inside.

Usually, we hope that what is revealed is good and worthy;  
After all, it's not considered good form  
to intentionally speak ill of the dead.  
But on the other hand,  
Obvious blemishes of character ought not be hidden either.  
Otherwise it cheapens all the rest.  
Obits are not meant to be puff pieces,  
but a clear-eyed assessment of another person's life.

I remember the most troubling obit I ever wrote.  
I had interviewed the dead man's son  
in order to learn more about his father.  
The son couldn't stop talking about his father's ...  
model train collection.  
It was an enormous and impressive collection,  
one the man had spent many years

and many, many thousands of dollars on.  
The trains, the son said,  
were his father's greatest passion.  
"He dedicated his life to his train collection," the son said.  
"It was the most important thing in the world to him."

Now, far be it from me to judge  
what has merit and value and what does not.  
I'm as guilty as the next person  
of occasionally wasting time on inconsequential things,  
of prioritizing things that simply bring me pleasure  
over things that actually make the world a better place.  
We all do that sometimes, don't we?  
And there's nothing wrong with toy trains!  
We all benefit from hobbies that bring us pleasure.  
But the danger is in losing sight of what truly matters,  
of allowing "things" to take over our life.

I certainly hope that whoever writes my obituary  
finds something better to say about me  
than that a collection of things  
was what mattered most to me.

In a world crying out for attention,  
where people are starving  
and hatred and racism and violence are surging,  
and all around me are opportunities to reach out and help others,  
to touch lives in ways that are profound and meaningful,  
there have got to be better ways to spend my life  
than playing with toy trains.  
Or as Jesus put it, than building bigger barns.

Because we all know that if we invest too much in barns,  
those big barns wind up controlling us.

Jesus knew that material things,  
no matter how fun and comforting, lovely and useful they may be,  
will never completely satisfy our deepest longings.  
We will always want more.  
Material goods make very poor gods for us to worship.

Just as the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures  
had to call the people back repeatedly  
from worshipping "other gods" than the God of Israel,  
so Jesus and Paul after him  
preached a gospel of spiritual values  
centered on the one true God,  
not the many, petty, fragile little gods  
that somehow grab our attention  
and too often capture our hearts.

Christ tells us that we need to be rich toward God.  
But what does that mean?  
I think it means that while we love the world best by loving God,  
it also means we love God best by loving the world.  
By loving God's people.  
All kinds of people –  
our family members, our friends, those who are most like us,  
as well as those who are least like us,  
but desperately need our love just the same.

We constantly need to ask ourselves  
if we're in danger of putting THINGS ahead of people.  
Just as importantly, we need to guard against  
*de-humanizing* people,  
so that they seem to us to have less value than things.

This last sin seems to be a particular danger in our present day,  
where many seem willing to tolerate  
vile, disgusting behavior from people in leadership,  
just as long as the stock market continues to go up.  
And so we see white nationalism rearing its ugly head more and more,  
and angry, insecure people –  
some of whom actually call themselves Christians –  
engaging in violent, racist language.

The Apostle Paul warns us that when we have been raised with Christ,  
there are certain behaviors we can no longer tolerate.  
Anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language, lying.  
As Christians, we cannot abide these things.

And dehumanizing language  
should have no place in American civic discourse.

Shame on us if we do not speak up.  
Shame on us if we allow others who call themselves Christian  
to abuse the Bible to preach bigotry and intolerance.

Because each and every one of us  
is complicit in our nation's waywardness  
if we see what's happening to others,  
and choose to remain silent.  
If we close our eyes to the evil around us,  
and instead lock ourselves away with our toy trains,  
to eat, drink and be merry,  
then we are no better than the rich fool of our Lord's parable.

You know, I really don't want people to leave here  
thinking I don't love toys.  
I do. They do have lots of lessons to teach us.

One of my favorite movie franchises is *Toy Story*.  
I hope you're all familiar with the cast,  
and have seen at least one of the four *Toy Story* movies.

In *Toy Story 2*,  
Woody, the beloved cowboy doll,  
discovers that he is a valuable collector's item,  
and that he and the other members of the Roundup gang  
are going to be sold to a toy museum in Tokyo.  
Woody has to decide  
whether to go back to his owner, Andy –  
a child who he knows will one day grow up and outgrow him –  
or go to the museum,  
where he will last forever,  
but will never again be loved.  
A child would never again take him in their arms,  
and lift him up,  
and hold him to their cheek.

What decision would you make?  
What decisions do we each make every day  
that guard our safety and our security,  
but that threaten to separate us  
from those things that truly matter?  
What treasure have we stored up for ourselves  
only to discover that what fills our big barns  
is ultimately worthless to us?

How do we want our own obituaries to read?  
Amen.