

Column

If you have ever been taxed with clearing out the house of someone who has died, you know what a chore that is. Such has been my task, along with several others from our church, over the past several weeks.

Room by room, dresser by dresser, sideboard by sideboard, we have gone through the house packing up some items and discarding others. A scene from Dicken's *A Christmas Carol* has passed through my mind on several occasions. The one I have in mind is of the charwoman, the laundress and the undertaker stripping away items from the house of the dead man who is still lying behind the bed curtains and is hardly cold. Their intent is to sell them and reap some financial gain for themselves.

Ours, we trust, is more honorable. Though the majority of the items will be sold, the goal is not to enrich our own coffers but to ensure the items so highly prized by the deceased will receive a good home and not be cast into a dumpster. More than that, the proceeds from the sale of these items will go for a good cause. Rummaging through someone else's things nevertheless brings mixed feelings and provokes thought. The first concerns the nature of material possessions.

They are blessings either because of their intrinsic beauty or utility. An item that is beautiful and artful – a hand-painted china bowl or a painting or print that brings forth longing when viewed – is an example of the first, of something possessing beauty in itself.

An example of the second – something that is utilitarian -- might be a stove, car or clock. Of course, beauty and utility are often combined in an object. For example, a piano with graceful lines and carved legs possesses both. It can be both enjoyed for itself and played. The same might be so with a clock, chair or car.

Material objects, in particular those that are beautiful and serviceable, do something else as well. They point us to God. In Genesis 1:31, we are told, "And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good." God is the great artisan who uses matter to make things which are beautiful and serviceable. More than that, in the verse I have just quoted, He seems to receive pleasure in viewing the works of His hands.

Material objects, especially those belonging to those who have died, are likewise capable of bringing sadness. They stand as stark reminders of the

transitory nature of this present order. They cry out that change and decay are all around us and that we live in a rented field.

For the Christian, this melancholy need not last. After all, the One who owns the field in which we now live plans to give us another. The author of Hebrews makes this clear when he writes: “For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come” (13:14). All that is lovely and serviceable in this present ‘city’ will in no wise be diminished in the world to come – in the new heavens and new earth promised in Revelation 21 – rather they will be enhanced.

So how should material things be approached in the present order? My answer and I think the answer given in the Bible is that they should be received as gifts from a good God, used, cared for, enjoyed and shared, but not turned into idols. The way to achieve the highest degree of happiness in this life is to use things, love people and ultimately God Himself. So let us do.

ALMIGHTY God, our heavenly Father, who declarest thy glory and showest forth thy handiwork in the heavens and in the earth; Deliver us, we beseech thee, in our several callings, from the service of mammon, that we may do the work which thou givest us to do, in truth, in beauty, and in righteousness, with singleness of heart as thy servants, and to the benefit of our fellow men; for the sake of him who came among us as one that serveth, thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
(The Book of Common Prayer).

The Rev. Victor H. Morgan is rector of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, Blue Ridge.