In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Alyce, a gifted and thoughtful hair artist here in Chestnut Hill, stopped me cold last week when she said: “You know a lot of people think they can go to church on Sunday, and then do all kinds of mean and nasty things all week – as though they have paid for it already.” I think she is right – and I told her so.

Is it like a Divine Scorecard? Is there a bank in the sky where you can get plus points for attending church – perhaps 10? And then you can draw it down over the week. So you deliberately cut off the person who had previously pulled in front of you with little warning --- umm, were you looking at a screen? Minus three – well, you were looking at a screen – maybe minus five. But you did go ahead and let the person with the whining three-year old go first in the grocery line – plus two. You get this. The question is – is this your mode?

Easy answer – we all do this! We are human, and we are primates. Our genetic inheritance trains us for these kinds of skills-- ranking, distinguishing, classifying, trying to figure out where we fit in the world. We mentally add and subtract against some abstract tally sheet. Some of us call that God’s scorecard – and some of us realize that is what we call “conscience.”

One of the many criticisms of humans is that we do this. Yet it’s an ancient process, and it will take thousands of years for our old, old, reptilian brains – down there at the base of our skulls – to stop just reacting forcefully to stimuli in our environment. Luckily, our great big frontal brains do a very good job (except when we are tired, stressed, addicted, angry, are adolescents with hormone surges, and so on) of figuring out how to prevent the old reptile from striking its prey and protecting its eggs.

Marie Kondo, a current media person, says that we need to de-clutter and only keep what gives us joy. She asks what will enhance our sense of self-worth. Our reptile instincts, aided and abetted by our primate genes (and perhaps our own family history,) tell us that we need to keep anything that might be useful, valuable or make others envious.
After 9/11, after the Great Recession, after Hurricane Sandy, many of us are wary about such a rosy message as this. “Only what brings you joy” sounds as though you might give away what got you through. Does she realize that the weather on the east coast goes between zero and 105 degrees? That we have to have three seasons of clothing: icy, middling and way too hot?

Jesus did not experience our Middle Atlantic Philadelphia conditions. But in Luke’s gospel today, he is telling a story that seems pretty suburban and rather understandable. The story is about an estate owner, not a villager, as so many other gospel passages are. Instead of being set in a walled-in village compound that holds livestock and the family quarters, this parable goes outside city walls to the estates of the wealthier families. After a very rich harvest, the owner of one villa rejoices. He’s made his multi-million. He will be on the lap of luxury for the rest of his life. All he has to do is build bigger barns, take in the harvest, and loan out the grain for several years at interest, and he’s got it made!

Only – God stops his heart, or he has a stroke. Anyway, it’s over. I guess technically he kept the harvest that gave him joy, but he never got to enjoy it…

Jesus suggests that whatever gives you joy may not always be what gives God joy. What gives God joy, says Jesus, is loving your neighbor as yourself.

This is rummage season at St. Paul’s. It is the reverse (or maybe I mean inverse) of Lent. During Lent we focus on our own relationship with God. During Rummage season at St. Paul’s we focus on our relationship with our neighbors. We do not ask “What will bring me joy?” but we ask “What do I have that will bring someone else joy?” We look at what we are not using, not needing, not feeding our own egos with. We ask: how can we love our neighbors and make our lives both simpler and more virtuous?

During Lent we “give up” and during Rummage season at St. Paul’s we “give away.” That’s a fairly subtle difference, but the result is huge. “Giving up” is self-focused. And we need to do that in Lent. But “giving away” encompasses all that Jesus meant in the Beatitudes. We give away what prevents us from drawing nearer to God. We review the things – perhaps – that give us joy, but that others could enjoy more. We give away the things that we were clinging to – because they reminded us of another life. Or we give away the things that might still fatally bond us to a life we have – by the grace of God – moved past.

Jesus asks us what we are keeping in the barn? And why do we endlessly want to build a bigger barn?
Yes, this is rummage season at St. Paul’s. It is, despite what the world may think, another sacred season for us. It is the time when we shed what is too heavy to bear. Whatever is leftover or discarded or unwanted because we have accepted Jesus’ invitation to accept his simple commandment of love – it is welcome. Bring it on Wednesdays or Sundays. Give it to others who may need it. A small miracle will happen to your stuff.

Your stuff becomes St. Paul’s rummage. St. Paul’s rummage becomes by the grace of God and the extraordinary labors of our rummage volunteers, the offerings of the sale after Labor Day weekend. And the results of that sale give hope and blessing to the many charities that feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, and shelter the homeless.

Yes, that sounds familiar, doesn’t it? It’s an echo of the Beatitudes – the Sermon on the Mount that laid out Jesus’s agenda. Well, in the 21st century here at St. Paul’s, it goes by a little longer route, but the result is the same.

So. Bring in your stuff. Volunteer to sort, tag, organize and sell. Do the St. Paul’s rummage thing. And be very certain that this is not mounding up your harvest in the barns – it is giving so that others may have joy.

And, in the spirit of rummage it is time for the annual Rummage Hymn!

Oh Lord throughout our Rummage time  
Be with us in our toil  
Make this a ministry of yours  
For us, your servants loyal.

Bless those who yearly pack away  
Their daily ministries,  
To make a place where rummage goods  
Are blest when given Thee.

Bless those who set up sturdy tables  
Where sorting may begin,  
And those who organize the start  
With patience and a grin.

Bless those who clear out closets full  
Of hats and gloves and shirts,
Lay cupboards bare of extra towels,
Glass, china, books and skirts.

Bless also those who sort and price
Measure, move and shift;
And those who carry everything
As well as those who lift.

Bless those who advertise and tell
Others of two dates
Who publicize and then pitch in
To make the pre-sale great.

Bless those who come to buy the stuff
And carry it away;
They leave behind more than enough
Our many grants to pay.

And last, Lord, bless the leaders kind
Who run the Rummage Sale
So those who get the dollars earned
Are helped and fed and hale.

*Amen.*