

On Keeping Things In Place¹
June 9, 1963

Most of us spent a good part of our lives “keeping things in place.” At home, there’s the dusting + the cleaning + the straightening up. At the factory or the store or the office – it’s housekeeping all over again: sorting, filing, storing, keeping records. If things are not kept in their proper place – the house is hard to live in and the store is soon out of business.

So keeping everything in its place is important: at home and on the job.

Some people, of course, have a disordering syndrome – their houses are always messy – their offices places of confusion. They just cannot keep anything straight. Junk and jumble is their native habitat. They don’t feel at home except in a wreck. I remember a woman who describe her \$150,000 ranch-style house as a “rather expensive cow pen.” Certainly no self-respecting guernsey would have stayed there. Cleanliness may not be right next to godliness – but it can’t be very far off. The Ap. Paul could have been talking about more than logic in worship when he wrote to the Corinthians: “Let all things be done decently and in order.”

The Presbyterians, however, may have made a fetish out of that phrase – “all things decently and in order” and gone to the other extreme. Christian char. + being fit to live with does involve something more than constant dusting + straightening + proper filing in triplicate. Some of the most difficult people I have ever known (to put it mildly) – never allowed a speck of dust in the house – or even one little thing out of place in the office. On the other hand, one of the best women + one of the happiest I ever knew said to me “The good book says, ‘ from dust thou art + to dust thou shalt return ,’ so why should I worry about a little on the way?” So I took the last year’s magazines and a couple of broken toys out of the chair – and sat down to a very pleasant conversation.

So – I suppose it’s a matter of balance – this keeping things in their place. Neither a trash heap nor a compulsive duster be – just keep things as “decently + in order”- as you can – and get on with the more important business of being a real person - a Christian none the less.

¹ A modified version of this sermon, titled “Everything In Its Place” was delivered on May 16 1982.

For when Jesus Christ talked of “keeping things in place” – he meant there was something more important about proper dealing with the material things in life than just keeping them all neat and straight.

For the disorderly person like the over-orderly person – are both suffering from the same spiritual disease: they are both dominated by their “things.” They have allowed their possessions, their goods, their property, their furniture, their filing system, their clothes, food, their accumulated “stuff” (whatever it is – and whether “spic and span” or “junkie like a trash can”) to get the upper hand.

They don’t even own their things anymore – their things own them. Years ago, a friend said a saving word to me: he said, “don’t be a slave to your automobile or to anything else you’ve got; let your automobile be your slave; let your possession serve you!”

Now – you see – this is beginning to keep “things” in their place. Funny how they want to dominate, to anthropomorphize a bit – If you let your possessions get the upper hand – if you let what you’ve got get “uppity” – boss you around – dominate you – claim all your attention – or persuade you that your standing depends on them – persuade you you’re a somebody or a nobody because you love them or don’t love them – create for you your whole self-image – then – as Jesus said quite clearly in the Sermon on the Mount – “Mormon” is not serving you anymore, you are now serving “Mormon” – and you are on your way to being miserable too.

If you allow your earthly goods to be the horse in your life instead of the cart – then they are definitely out of their proper place – and you are headed for what the Lord called “anxiety” – a tremendous amount of unnecessary “worry” and “fretting.”

Because “things” being as unstable as they are (a bit of “rust,” said Jesus “a moth,” or a “thief” – and where’s your finery? – gone the way of all flesh – including our own someday – for we are soon dead) – things be as transcendent as they are – they better not be the chief motive power in a man or woman’s life – not that food and cloths aren’t important – they are – said Jesus – “your heavenly father knoweth that you need your calories and cloths” – but keep them in their proper place – don’t let them dictate to you – and tell you you are worthless just because you don’t have as many or as finer ones as somebody else has – don’t let things “humiliate” you like that – and don’t let them insinuate in your ear or shout to the world that you are better than the rest because you have more or finer “things” than your neighbor has – don’t let your stuff lord it over you like that.

Why? Because, said Jesus, “you can’t serve God and Mormon.” That is, if you let your Mormon (necc. as it is) completely master you – you won’t have the time or the will to get on with being what the God know is necessary to make you a real person – good and glad to be alive – and a joy to live with.

So – put “things in their place.” Don’t let them play god to you. And, do this, says Jesus, by putting the Father God in His place. If anything’s going to lord it over you in this world, don’t let it be your goods – as good as they are – let it be Lord God. This gets the Christian’s “chain of command” straight. You boss your “things” + let God boss you. Now we are really “keeping things in place.”

When then – said Jesus – when you “seek first the kingdom of God + his righteousness” – when you first do what’s right acc. to the King of heaven – then you can enjoy what you need to eat or wear – the way “the birds of the air” and “the lilies of the field” do – and make no more profession of it. Roses don’t brag before dandelions + chickweed doesn’t feel embarrassed before a tulip. Chickens don’t pine to be swallows + robins don’t laugh at sparrows. They are not like those “gentiles” – said the Jew, Jesus.

They are all far too busy with more important matters.

So – do your day’s work – said the Christ – if you do that acc. to law + grace of God – you’ve got your hands full – with no time to fret – especially about tomorrow – just “keep things in their proper place” – “you under the authority of God + this world under you” – it’s the right chain of command.

Living this sort of faith – this kind of faithful life – you need not fret – (“who by fretting, has ever added a day to his span?”) – you’ll live as long as well as the good lord intends