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Packaging Science

Hebrews 9:24-28

Mark 12:38-44

Introduction to Hebrews passage: The book of Hebrews can be difficult to understand. Part of that is the assumption that the reader will be familiar with ancient Jewish worship practices.

The passage we read today references the practice of bringing animals to the Temple in Jerusalem that were sacrificed by the High Priest on the people's behalf to atone for their sin. The author of Hebrews draws a contrast between that ancient practice of repeatedly sacrificing animals to God to atone for Sin and the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ who, because of God's love for us, has forever forgiven our Sin. We no longer have to keep offering sacrifices as if we had to earn God's love and Grace. Christ's sacrifice on our behalf is sufficient now and always, and he will return to "save those who are eagerly waiting for him".

I did not know, until we went to visit Clemson University while doing college tours some years ago, that there was a college course of study called packaging science. But, it makes a lot of sense. Now that we order everything from shampoo to dining room tables online, it makes perfect sense that there should be people who work to ensure that what we order gets to its destination in one piece. I have learned that packaging science focuses on many aspects of the delivery of goods, like protection for the product and minimization of waste and cost. And the creation of a whole course of study also recognizes the power that packaging has on our patterns of consumption.

Because one of my daughters' friends is a packaging science major, our trips to the grocery store with them have become much more interesting. When they are with me, we stop and we consider (they teach me) which of the products is packaged most attractively and efficiently. And we discuss how the packaging either draws us to purchase, or not, the products that are in the packages.

As I was thinking about this, I was reminded of Lunchables. Lunchables first hit the market when my children were in preschool. A self-contained, ready-made lunch with a slick and easy to remove plastic cover, Lunchables were irresistible. My children thought they were the most wonderful lunch possible, and I got the benefit of not having to think or to prepare anything for their lunchboxes. It is a win-win right up until we turn the Lunchables over and begin to read the nutritional label. Then the salt, fat and processed food that is hidden under that slick,

colorful plastic cover is revealed as not very healthy. But the lure of the packaging proved powerful.

Both Jesus and the Book of Hebrews gives us all a lesson in the power of packaging science today. Jesus tells both his followers and the Jewish religious officials, listening in as he teaches in the Jerusalem Temple, that simply offering prayers, looking holy or giving our offerings is no guarantee of spiritual health or of a love for God. Jesus reminds us of something we already know. We can bring our offerings and we can offer prayers and we can say that they are to honor God, but our gifts and prayers may serve God, or they may serve ourselves. And often no one but God and the person doing the offering or praying can tell the difference.

Jesus says that God knows the hearts of those who bring their offerings to the Temple. On the outside, every one of them was being obedient and faithful. But it was the heart of the widow, that was visible only to Jesus, that set her apart as faithful, generous and true. The true motive of the giver or the pray-er is visible only to God. The faithfulness of our actions, our worship, our prayers and our gifts has no relationship to the appearance or packaging. It is not the amount, the beauty of the act, the pomp and circumstance of the worship, or even the social standing of the worshiper that determines whether or not our gifts and worship honor God. What determines whether or not we honor God is the content, the intent, the love and the passion of the gift or worship.

Hebrews contrasts all of the pomp and circumstance of the ritual sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple – a high priest dressed in holy garments amid the smoke, fire, incense and animal blood – with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ who – despised and rejected – was crucified with two other criminals outside the city walls. Hebrews says that it was the latter sacrifice that forever changed the equation between God and humankind. People were confused because Jesus came to earth packaged as a carpenter and was killed in the garb of a criminal. Scripture today reminds us that the packaging is incidental – of no consequence – and we should no longer be confused.

I was thinking this week about how very often it happens for us that we begin to feel restless, disappointed, disconnected or depressed. Life isn't what we thought it would be. Our jobs are not what we wanted them to be. Our marriages or our children are fraught with conflict or distance. We begin to feel discontent and restless. And so we begin to look for a solution. We think maybe if we got – another church – another hobby – another house – another experience – another degree – another spouse – another car . . . that it might fix our restless spirits. And, guess what, often it does for a while. But most of the time, after a while, our restless, listlessness returns, and we realize that we have confused the packaging for the content. Packaging can serve to distract us from what is true, important and life-giving.

Now, sometimes it is necessary to change our packaging or outward circumstances. Sometimes a job needs to be changed, sometimes a marriage needs to end, sometimes we do need another house, another car or a new hobby. But, that is not our only option. We can change the outward circumstances of our lives, AND/OR we can change our inward content. And

sometimes our packaging is changed by an accident or circumstances beyond our control and not as we wish. The time comes when we find ourselves no longer able to go as we wish, or limited by physical or mental disability. Maybe the children take our car keys or we lose a job we love. At times like this, we can confuse our sense of self with our packaging, or we can remember that it is the state of our relationship with God, our faith, our heart and our ability to love that really counts. People of faith should know more than others that restless or listless spirits are not often fixed by packaging them in a different circumstance. WE can seek to resolve our restless spirits by changing the outward appearance or packaging, but often the real fix comes when we attend to our hearts, souls and minds.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ tells us that God came to earth to offer us life, love, Grace, acceptance and renewal. But that Gospel came packaged in a way that was confusing to those who thought that truth and power and life came dressed in crimson and gold or in power and prestige. And until we acknowledge that packaging is not related to content, we will not give up on the beauty of the packaging and seek and desire what God has to offer us more than anything else.

So, what are we to do when life feels disappointing, sad, unjust or boring? What are we to do when our faith seems flat and we feel disconnected from God?

I think that today's Scriptures invite us to ask ourselves if and or where we have confused the packaging with the contents.

First, perhaps we need to determine if, indeed, we need to change the packaging. Is a relationship abusive, a job toxic, a church preaching that which is not Gospel? But if the answer to that first question is "no", then it is time to peel back the packaging and think about the content of our lives. To peel back the packaging means that we need to first name and claim how packaging affects us? Talk with those we trust about how over investing in how things look (the packaging) has led us astray and has caused us to spend time, energy and money on things that are not healthy or life giving.

Then, maybe the most difficult and most important question is, do we really want to love God and to serve God? Do we believe that if we will seek first the Kingdom of God that all else will be added as well? Do we really want to follow Christ's call to be a disciple?

If the answer to those questions is "no", then time to honestly say and examine that answer is critical. I have found that prayers to ask God to give me a thirst for prayer and an undeniable desire to know God have – over the long term – helped to adjust my packaging preferences. It is not easy to love God, and I am no expert. But I am better than I was, and I consider that to be an answer to my prayers. So, maybe begin with prayer. Dear God, I want life and love and wholeness. Give me a desire to seek you, to know you and to love you that even I cannot resist.

If the answer to those questions about what we really want – what content is really important to us – leads us to seek to know and to love God, then maybe the restlessness and depression can be addressed by time honored spiritual disciplines.

- Stop valuing other's opinions and try to learn more about God's opinions. What does God want and value and love?
- Work on giving – time, energy and money – and actually give with an intent to honor God. Offer our gifts in love and humility, not expecting recognition or power or thanks for the gift. Remember a few weeks ago I talked about the difference between giving – which is a one-way action – I give – and investing, which is a two-way action – I give and then I get. Practice giving - and especially giving to God.
- Acknowledge to ourselves and to others our imperfection, flaws and sin-addiction, and stop spending time, energy and money on trying to make the outward package look perfect.
 - We don't confess our sins in worship every Sunday to make God love us and accept us, we confess our sins BECAUSE God loves us and accepts us.
 - We don't offer our tithes and offerings to make God or others respect us, we offer our tithes and offerings out of gratitude and joy that we have something that can meet others' needs.
 - We don't come to worship because God values a perfect-attendance record, we come to worship because it helps us remember that God – NOT ME/WE – is eternal and holy. Worship is our grateful response because we have come to know and to love the God who made us, knows us, forgives us and redeems us.

I believe that when we deal with our restless, disconnected selves in this way that we will find that the packaging has less impact on us. When we love and seek God, then worship can happen when we like the sermon and when we don't. Worship can happen when we sing with a pipe organ or we sing with electric guitars and drums. Because then, our worship will be generated out of a grateful and loving heart that seeks God, instead of being dependent on the outward packaging.

Because when the outward packaging fails us – and it always fails us - what we seek - truth, Grace, forgiveness, acceptance and love – are all found in God. God alone is able to satisfy our longing and restless hearts.