

***“Garbage Collectors”***  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**11<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**June 14, 2020**

**First Scripture Reading: James 2:14-17**

<sup>14</sup>What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? <sup>15</sup>If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, <sup>16</sup>and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? <sup>17</sup>So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

**Second Scripture Reading: Matthew 22:37-40**

<sup>37</sup>[Jesus] said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” <sup>38</sup>This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup>And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ <sup>40</sup>On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”



**Sermon: “*Garbage Collectors*”**

Given the choice, which job would you rather have: President of the United States, or Garbage Collector? I Know. These days the answer may not be so clear. Being President would be hard – lots of stress and criticism, always in the spotlight, everything you do and say gets over-analyzed and put under a microscope. Plus, the job really seems to age a person. After 8 years as President, both George W. Bush and Barack Obama looked as if they had aged 20. But there are definitely perks to the job, too. Flying in Air Force One, living at the White House with a world class chef on call 24-7. You get to meet interesting people and go to interesting places. Plus, if Aliens are real, I’m pretty sure the President is one of the first people who gets to meet them.

If you ask kids what they want to be when they grow up, you’ll get all kind of answers. One survey conducted by Highlights Magazine showed that 35% of the children they polled ages 6-12 wanted to be President when they grew up. But again, it all depends on which kids you ask and when. Another survey conducted last summer asked kids to choose between only five potential future careers: Astronaut, Teacher, Musician, Professional Athlete, and YouTube Blogger. The biggest vote-getter was YouTube Blogger. Go figure.<sup>1</sup>

But no matter who you ask or how you ask it, you’re probably not going to find a lot of kids who say that when they grow up, they want to be a garbage collector. Which is why it was so remarkable when the Make-A-Wish Foundation granted 6-year-old Ethan Dean his wish in 2016 and his wish was to be a garbage collector for a day. Which isn’t so weird when you think about kids and the fact that garbage collectors get to drive around in big trucks and hang off the sides of them while their moving and nobody complains when they get dirty because that’s kind of their job. That’s got 6-year-old boy written all over it. But it is a little extraordinary that, given the opportunity to do almost anything, go to Disney World, meet a famous person, be a member of a professional sports team for a day, that this little boy wanted to be a garbage collector.

I doubt very many of us would have made that same choice. We tend to prefer being comfortable, powerful, and respected. We want our jobs to be fun and rewarding and pay well. And even though the

work is hard and the scrutiny grueling, there is no one who has more opportunity to be comfortable and do more fun and amazing things, than the president. But consider this: if the president missed work for a day or two, would anyone really notice? How about for a week? A year? Presidents go on vacation all the time. Sometimes they spend time in the hospital. Ronald Reagan was in the hospital twice during his administration. Do you know what stops when a president takes time off? Nothing. Certainly important things don't get done and important decisions don't get made, but the government keeps rolling right along, at least as much as it did before.

Do you know what happens when the garbage collectors all take the day off at the same time? Or better yet, when they go on strike for weeks at a time? Chaos. We like to think it's the leaders and the big wigs that are most important, but it's really the workers. In this time of pandemic, we've seen exactly the importance of the people who have difficult jobs that most of us probably didn't dream of having when we were young.

Doctors, and nurses, are amazing public servants on the front line of this battle against COVID-19. And I thank God for them every day. But so are the orderlies and the administrative assistants and the custodians that keep hospitals clean and running smoothly. And imagine what life would be like without the people who stock shelves at the supermarket and the people who deliver prescriptions and meals to folks who can't get out because they are vulnerable. Think about the custodial staffs that clean the places we can't avoid going to.

Take the executives out of the equation and the world keeps right on turning. Take the garbage collectors and the custodians out, and the world stops and falls to pieces. We only need one president and you could probably argue that even one is too many. But we need lots of garbage collectors. They make the world go 'round. And that fact is instructive for us.

You see, Jesus didn't call us to be "presidents." He called us to be "garbage collectors." We are called to do the hard work of looking out for each other, of caring about each other, of making sure that people don't fall through the cracks. The greatest law is that you love God with all that you have and all that you are, but the second law is that you love your neighbor in the same way that you love yourself. And that takes work. But few of us are looking for more work to do. Our whole reason for being sometimes seems to be to get to a place where we don't *have* to work so hard. Where life is easier and our worries are few. Which is great, but Jesus calls us to more than that.

Because too many of our sisters and brothers in this world are struggling just to make ends meet. Too many of our sisters and brothers have seen their families torn apart by violence and racism and fear. Too many of our sisters and brothers are working as hard as they can, sometimes working two and three jobs and yet still have to choose between paying the rent or buying food or getting a prescription filled. Too many of our sisters and brothers are doing their best but are finding that the system is stacked against them because of the color of their skin or their nation of origin or their religion.

That's what all these protests are about. People keep getting offended by the words "Black Lives Matter" saying that actually all lives matter. Well it's true that all lives matter. But right now, we need to be reminded that many black lives are at risk. The phrase "Black Lives Matter" doesn't mean "*Only* black lives matter," it means "Black lives matter, *too*." And in this country, there is a very strong historical case for the need for us to say that and to say it often and loudly.

But if we can turn away from the problems of the world and ignore the struggles of our brothers and sisters, it is because we are privileged enough to do so. If we are able to cruise through life unaffected by poverty or disease or lack of access to health care, or by being a refugee or living under an oppressive government, or being discriminated against because of our race or gender or religion or sexuality; if we live life unaffected by these things, then we should consider ourselves fortunate. But we should also consider ourselves called to help those of our brothers and sisters who *are* affected by them.

Being a disciple is not a spectator sport. And you can't be one just through placing some canned food in a collection bin or mailing in a check. Charity alone will not solve the problems of this world. It's going to require us to become garbage collectors. We're going to have to get our hands dirty, put ourselves on the line, and do the hard work. But lest you become overwhelmed at the magnitude of what we are called to do and be, I will share with you a story.

Elmer Bendiner served on a B-17 bomber crew with the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force in Europe during World War II. During one mission over Germany, his plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire. His plane was damaged, but Elmer and his crewmates completed the mission and returned home to their base in England. After they landed, a maintenance crew found several unexploded 22-millimeter anti-aircraft shells in one of the plane's fuel tanks. They normally would have exploded on impact, destroying the plane. Elmer and his crewmates, by rights, should have all been dead. But these appeared to have been duds. After several days, an intelligence officer who had examined the shells confided to the crew that upon examination they found that none of the shells actually carried any charges. All of them were empty except one. And inside of it, there was a small scrap of paper with a note written in Czech that said simply "*This is all we can do for you now.*"<sup>2,3</sup>

Millions of anti-aircraft shells were produced by thousands of workers all over Nazi-occupied Europe during the war. But on one particular day, one person decided that they would not participate in the Nazi war machine any longer. And make no mistake, had that person been discovered they would have likely been arrested for treason and summarily executed. One person made a daring decision to take a step, however tiny, however insignificant, and the courage to take that step made a life-time's worth of difference to the ten men flying in that bomber high over Europe, and to their families, and their communities and to their country's effort to end the war.

One person among thousands. Having the courage and the initiative to *do* something, even something so small and seemingly inconsequential. It doesn't take the power of a President or the wealth of a CEO. It just takes regular people willing to get their hands dirty; willing to be garbage collectors. The Kingdom of God is constructed from such as this.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Leskin, Paige. "American kids want to be famous on YouTube, and kids in China want to go to space: survey - Business Insider." Business Insider, 17 July 2019, [www.businessinsider.com/american-kids-youtube-star-astronauts-survey-2019-7](http://www.businessinsider.com/american-kids-youtube-star-astronauts-survey-2019-7).

<sup>2</sup> Bendiner, Elmer. *The Fall of Fortresses: A Personal Account of the Most Daring, and Deadly, American Air Battles of World War II*. Putnam, 1980.

<sup>3</sup> Buhler, Rich & Staff. "The Fall of Fortresses by Elmer Bendiner, and a Note Found in a Dud Shell -Truth!& Fiction!" Truth or Fiction?, 17 Mar. 2015, [www.truthorfiction.com/fall-of-fortresses-bendiner](http://www.truthorfiction.com/fall-of-fortresses-bendiner).