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A Time to Throw Away

A time to keep,

And a time to throw away; Ecclesiastes 3:6

Perhaps there is no time when I more identify with the writer of Ecclesiastes than when I clean out my refrigerator. "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." "What profit has a man (or woman) from all (their) labor in which they toil under the sun?"

I must confess I find it difficult to find fulfillment in menial household tasks such as cleaning out the frig. My soul cries out, "Surely life is more than this!" Yet at my house, cleaning out the frig falls onto the task list with my name on it.

So last week I accidentally found myself cleaning out the refrigerator. You know those moments. I pulled out something and threw it away. Then I took out some leftovers and gave them to Charlie, our beloved mutt. And suddenly, one thing led to another and I was doing it. Relentlessly tossing out everything that cluttered my frig.

I got so caught up in the experience that I began checking the expiration dates on my bottled dressings, peppers, pickles, you name it, I was on a mission to have the perfectly organized refrigerator and to get rid of everything old.

First of all, I must admit that I was haunted by the words I recently read in a magazine that reminded me that the most expensive part of our food budget was the foods that we threw away. Ouch. I really intended to eat that bit of leftovers. I meant to cook stuffed peppers but now they were, well, unstuffable.

But the pursuit of the clean frig overcame the guilt of wasted dollars and I continued. I knew my daughter and son-in-law would be pleased that I was chunking those old dressing and mayonnaise containers. They have "expiration date phobia", a disease I find exists primarily in young people. Every time that they visit our home, I find them checking out the expiration dates on products in my frig. They moan and groan and declare that things cannot be eaten once the expiration date was passed. My reasonable arguments with them never help. I mean, can a vinegar-based dressing really magically be ruined at the expiration date? Can pickles really expire – after all, they are preserved? But Kara Beth and Dave will do without Ranch dressing or mayo or pickles if the date is two days past the expiration.

So I found myself thinking how happy they would be when they came home and looked in my frig. (Okay, I admit that I kept one or two things that were past the date. My parents lived through the Great Depression. I just can't get completely healed.)

And then there is my husband. I confess that one time many, many years ago, I had some, well, old might be a gentle way to describe them, bowl of peas in the frig. He warmed them up and ate them and became a little sick (well, a lot sick!). He has never gotten healed over that experience. He is paranoid that he will eat something out of the frig that is old. Even when he knows that we just ate it two days ago, he will ask me if it is okay. I mercilessly tell him that one day he will have to forgive me and get healed from the experience of 20 years ago.

Back to my cleaning experience... I even washed the shelves and the storage bins in the door. I made a new organization strategy. Maybe I should include a picture here for you. I mean my frig looks great. When I finished, I almost felt like daring someone to mess it up which is a total joke when your home is heavy on testosterone, 3 men and 1 woman. Even our dogs are male. I tell my daughter that she bailed out on me when she got married, leaving me with the "maledom" world.

I got out my Sharpie permanent marker and renewed my practice of dating things as I put them in the frig. I felt a temporary sense of accomplishment. But down deep, there was this nagging feeling that ultimately it was futile. The writer of Ecclesiastes was right. But for the moment, I had conquered and taken dominion over a piece of my space.

And I know that there is "a time to throw away". Spiritually. There is a time to clean out all the old stuff. The stuff

that says “I am past my usefulness”, things that say “I am rotten”; the stored stuff inside us that has been pushed to the back and forgotten but is now being highlighted and should be dealt with. We can choose to ignore that stuff but it gets more difficult to deal with over time. The longer it is ignored, the worse it smells, the more decomposed it becomes, the more its rottenness leaks out onto everything else around it.

I Corinthians 15: 46 tells us that “first the natural, then the spiritual.” So as I cleaned out my frig, God spoke to me about my heart. “There is stuff that needs to go. It’s been pushed back too long. It stinks. It’s time to throw it away.”

When we allow God’s Spirit to work in our spiritual refrigerators, the places in our hearts where we have shelved stuff, the results parallel my natural cleaning project. Bagfuls of stuff that need to be taken out – completely out of the house – thrown away – far away. But the results also yield a heart that is not crowded by things that clutter our usefulness and although perhaps our hearts cannot be organized, they can be cleaned.

And I guess that I will always keep a couple of jars of stuff that should have been thrown away. In my humanness, I struggle to release control of all my stuff. I am a little like my husband who still looks at those bowls of leftovers and wonders if they will hurt him. I look at God and ask “Can I trust You?”

A time to throw away... To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven.

So perhaps you, as I, need to throw some things away. Do some deep cleaning. Wash the shelves and storage bins. Get rid of the junk.

And maybe you will find, as I do, that if we will daily clean out the stuff that needs to be thrown away, the project doesn’t become so overwhelming, difficult, and time-consuming. Whether you find yourself in a season when you need to do some deep cleaning or you just need to do some daily maintenance, remember that cleansing is not really your work at all. It is a work of grace. All you need to do is open your refrigerator and give Him permission to throw away whatever He says is old, ruined, past its usefulness. Therein you find true cleansing as the old hymn declares, “What can wash away my sin, nothing but the blood of Jesus.”

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