

The lessons in keeping

By [Martha-Lynn Corner](#)

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I am in a phase of radical decluttering. The phrase “spring cleaning” comes to mind, but it’s a bit too Disneyish and doe-eyed to describe the full-scale assault currently underway against old toys, outgrown clothes, and random piles of crap inside my house. Until this is finished, I can’t relax.

I used to flop like a wet mushroom on the couch once the kids were in bed for the evening, but now I sit, rigid, physically aware that there are three years of Christmas cards shoved into the dining room sideboard. “Throwwww ussss out,” they whisper, the “preciousssss” absent but implied. “Sit down and take care of it later,” my husband urges, oblivious. But I know what lurks in closet and cabinet, and it’s not going to clear out itself. Every nook and cranny in my home has become a battlefield, and I am both vanquished and utterly defeated with every bout.

The thing is, I wonder if I’m fighting a losing battle. Empty shelves feel like a victory, but I’m only one season away from needing somewhere to store the clothes the kids have outgrown. And though I do try hard to be careful about the things I purchase for myself, eventually there will be some deep-discounted tablecloth at Target that will seem like a good idea at the time but will, in fact, be hideous. Out of sight it will go, and out of mind, until the next time the house is bursting at the seams and this whole exhausting cycle begin again.

This morning, bleary-eyed from a night of just thinking about the junk in the coat closet, I decided it would be a good Lenten thing to do to read [The Great Litany](#) from the Book of Common Prayer. And I breathed deeply and sank into penitence and the hope of redemption when the needle was ripped off the record player right about here:

That it may please thee to bless and keep all thy people,
We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.

The Litany is a funny thing. There are hopeful prayers and prayers for things that have already been accomplished—mercies and blessings that God has granted. We

pray, for instance, to be delivered by Christ's "Agony and Bloody Sweat." It's a vivid image recalling the crucifixion, which has already taken place; we pray for the deliverance that we have already received. Yet during Lent, when our lectionary and focus are on walking with Jesus to his agony (and then beyond), we suspend what we already know to experience what we so deeply need. I'd been marked by ashes as a tangible reminder that I belong to God. And suddenly, this morning, a divine finger pointing to that fact and beyond—I belong to God, and God is going to keep me. Forever. Because I am unique and precious and worth more than a whim or a season.

It makes me think about commitment. It makes me think about ownership and true value. It brings me, once again, to the value of stewardship and of the need to consider how I spend both my resources of money and time if I'm constantly caught in the clutter cycle. Further, there are only so many hours in the day. Spending time with my family is exponentially more valuable to me than all the deep discounts that Target has to offer, but in constantly needing to create a space to clear out the evidence of buyer's remorse, I am sacrificing that which I most want to keep. And I am cheating all of us out of potential blessings.

Some of Lent's disciplines we choose at the outset, and some are born within us in the act of keeping Lent. This morning, keeping Lent means a serious inner elucidation of what it means to "keep" anything. As I am loved and kept by my Father in heaven, how do I love and keep what is most precious to me? More than reordering my cabinets, how might I reorder my life?

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