

Simplicity

March 7, 2010

---Video Drama Before Sermon

Welcome back to our Bii Fit series where we're talking about the things that we can do in order to Bii Fit, Spiritually. This week we're going to hit on the discipline of Simplicity: it's living a life of natural sincerity, without pretentious luxuries and ornamentations. And I have to be honest, when I started working on this sermon, my mind immediately went to the Amish. Being from Central Pennsylvania, I have seen my share of Amish people, but I figured a little bit of research couldn't hurt.

Let me tell you...that's nuts. There is a ton of junk out on the internet. As I was searching, I stumbled upon a website called ehow.com. Apparently they make up list of how to do just about everything. They had a list on "How to become Amish", "How to Converse with the Amish", and even "How to dress for an Amish wedding." Now I know the Amish are a little different, but really? Is a simple life that far from our understanding?

So I kept searching and I found some Lancaster jokes: You know you're from Lancaster when your driving lessons involved learning to avoid horse droppings. Or you know you're from Lancaster when you know someone who repairs gasoline-powered lawn mowers, but is forbidden to own one. The Amish and their simple way of life have really brought a lot of confusion to a relatively (forgive the pun) simple topic.

So let's talk about it. What is simplicity? And how do we practice this discipline? Well, I think the first thing we need to do is clear up some of these myths and some of this confusion.

Simplicity is not...Forced Poverty

For some reason, people think that to live a simple life we have to be flat broke, living in a van down by the river! No, that's how you get on Saturday Night Live. Simplicity is not forced poverty. God's plan was never that we would lead impoverished lives. Think about it, back in the beginning, God gave us the entire world to use and manage as we see fit. That's anything but poverty. The richness of the Garden of Eden must have been amazing.

Sometimes people go to the other extreme and they think simplicity is all about shunning materialism. "Things are bad. We have to get rid of our things." They cite Proverbs 11:28, "Those who trust in their riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf." And they focus on the idea that our riches will get us nowhere. Although that's true, these people can often go to the extreme of idolizing anti-materialism. It becomes more about getting rid of our things than trusting in God. But that is not simplicity.

Simplicity is not...Idolatry

So okay, if simplicity is not forced poverty and it's not idolatry, then what is it? For that answer we have to go to Philippians 4:10-19. Listen to what Paul writes.

So here's Paul. He's writing to the church that has supported him in his ministry and he's thanking them for all the things that they've done for him and in the course of doing that he's trying to share some of the wisdom he's learned along the way. Now, to be sure, finances were a tough situation in the early church. Monies, lands, and general possessions were pooled together to help everyone survive and one of the early lessons that Paul had learned was the value of being content. And this really is at the heart of leading a simple life.

Simplicity is Contentment

He says it very clearly there in verse 12, "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty." In Paul's ministry he had dined with the rich and he starved with the poor. He was shipwrecked and he had been stoned (rocks not pot). Paul had experienced the ups and down and in all that, he said the secret is to be "content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want." You know, there's no point in focusing on the "what ifs". If you spend your life living for tomorrow, then you never really live, do you? The same is true with simplicity. If we live our lives lusting after what we don't have, then when will we ever enjoy the life we do have?

That's one of the problems that we Methodists have with the lotto and gambling. If you live your life on the chance that you'll hit the jackpot, then when will you ever really live? Instead, be happy with what you have and thank God for giving it to you. Paul hit on that same theme in the next verse of this passage. In verse 13 he writes, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." Paul has his mind straight. He knows that simplicity is...

Knowing we are Blessed & Sustained

"I can do everything through him who gives me strength." God gives me strength. God gives me blessings and because of those blessings, because of God, I can do everything. I am sustained every day in every way by God. All that I do is because of God. I think most of us in this room can agree that God is the creator and sustainer of this world. Am I right? Now why is it that we struggle to accept the concept that we are blessed and sustained by God? Is it because we think it's our own hard work that's bringing about all these blessings? Is it because we feel entitled? What gives us that right? God gives us blessings to keep in trust for Him. God sustains us every day.

You may be thinking to yourself, "Sure, that's great, but I still do a great deal to take care of the things I have. Don't tell me God gets all the credit here." Well, let me give you a for instance. Do you lock your car in a parking lot? (Yes) Do you believe that locks only keep honest people honest—in other words, criminals are going to take it either way? (Yes) Okay, so who keeps the criminals from stealing your car? Could it be God? I mean really, at some point, if we believe that God is the creator and sustainer of the universe, we have to give Him a little credit for the things that are out of our hands. That's what living a simple life is all about. It's acknowledging God and the credit that's due Him.

We are only stewards of this earth. You've heard that said about protecting the environment and your kids, right? Keep it green so they can keep it forever? Yeah, it's kind of the same idea with the blessings God gives us. They are only ours to keep in trust for God. God gave them to us and for that reason, we should do what God would want done with them. It's the idea of:

Sharing All that We Have

That's simplicity and that's that basis for tithing. We give 10% of our income to God because God told Israel that He wanted them to give 10%. It's not that we're bound by that law, it's that we know that's what God wants done with His things. God wants us to be good stewards and give 10%. Paul hits the same idea in verses 15 and 16. He tells the church, you know how hard it was for me and you sent me aid. You did what God would have wanted. And Paul wants to give them credit for what they've done, for the good that they have shared with him.

I guess sharing really is a simple concept, isn't it? A few weeks ago in all the snow, anyone with a snow-blower understood the importance of sharing what we have. Anyone who owns a truck knows the same thing. Aren't people always asking to borrow it? I get asked all the time, and I don't mind. God blessed me with it, and I'm going to bless others with it. If you have a pool, do you throw pool parties? What is your attitude toward your things? Are they yours for your use or are they God's for God's use? Similarly:

Simplicity means...Giving it Away

...our belongings that is. How many people heard about Warren Buffet? Three and a half years ago he decided to give it all away: \$44 billion. He wrote his kids out of the will and decided that his entire fortune would go to philanthropic causes, 85% of it would be given away before he died. Look folks, this is not forced poverty, it's a mental attitude that this is not mine, it's God and I'm going to give it all away. Does that mean you have to be broke when you die? No—but you do have to live realizing you can't take it with you.

Simplicity means we...Buy Useful, Not Useless

Gadgets are great. I'm a sucker for a good tool, but if it doesn't work, if it doesn't improve our lives, if it's too complicated to be useful, then it's useless! Only a very small percentage of those "As-seen-on-tv" products really work, but we buy them don't we. Well, simplicity means avoiding them and all the other useless garbage in this world. Make God's investments worth it. Buy things that are useful.

Simplicity also means...Responsible Debt-Free Living

Let me teach you a phrase that Dave Ramsey taught me (he's the less annoying, more tactful, male version of Suzie Orman). Dave Ramsey teaches "Debt is stupid." As a man who has gone from riches to rags twice, he should know. Debt is dumb and God doesn't like it either. In the Old Testament God told the people to forgive debts every seven years. In the New Testament

Paul tells us that we should, “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another” (Rom. 13:8). Responsible debt-free living is simplicity.

To do that, to live debt-free, that may mean living within our means (heaven forbid!). It may mean not putting in that new pool and fitness center at the house. It may mean going to the park instead of buying 100 acres in the country. It may mean enjoying community owned property rather than buying it for yourself. But that is a simple life.

Simplicity means we...Enjoy Without Owning

Do you have to own an ATV or a Snowmobile? Can you rent one? Are you home enough to enjoy your own pool? Would the local pool be better? Here’s one that gets me...do you have to buy that tool or is there someone who can loan it to you? Ugh! I hate that! I feel like such a leach when I do that, but in reality I’m fostering a sense of community and interdependence when I do that. Whatever happened to barrowing a cup of sugar? That hasn’t happened in years!

So the question that you face this morning is: Where is God calling you to simplify your life? A simple life doesn’t mean that you need to go out tomorrow and sell your car and your house and live in a cardboard box. Simplicity doesn’t even mean that you can’t have nice things. What simplicity does mean is that we have to live our lives for God. We have to treat our things as God’s things. So how is God calling you to be simple? Where will you simplify your life?

[Great chance to recap the idea of a tithe in the presentation for the offering...]