

DISCIPLINES OF FAITH: SIMPLICITY

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Mark 10:17-31

In 1774, on August 6, a ship docked in New York harbor. This ship had departed from Liverpool three months earlier. Among the passengers on this ship were nine members of a religious sect who had embarked for America to escape persecution and to establish a new home where they could worship freely. This group, led by a woman they called Mother Ann, was part of a community named the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing. They referred to themselves as the Believers. We know them as the Shakers.

The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing was formed thirty years earlier in England. They started out in Manchester, England, as members of the Society of Friends—the Quakers. That group, however, became strongly influenced by another group known as the Camisards. The Camisards were Huguenots—French Protestants. To escape persecution by the authorities in France they had relocated to England. They got involved with the Quakers in Manchester and the new, combined group broke away from the Quakers in 1747. This particular group of Quakers had become known as the Shaking Quakers because of their ecstatic trembling during their worship. A guest who observed a Shaker service in 1825 wrote that it began with a step-and-shuffle kind of dance, which increased to a “vertical commotion” of leaping, yelling, shrieks and shouts. This furious whirling continued until the exhausted dancers “sank on the floor, whilst others were scarcely able to get to their seats.”

Thirty years later, a young woman named Ann Lee—the one who would be known as Mother Ann—received a revelation that she was to establish a church in America. The ones who sailed with her settled near Albany, New York, and started a community and began to gather followers.

These Believers—the Shakers—were different than most other Christians. For one thing, they were avowed pacifists and refused to fight in any war. They were conscientious objectors. They also had progressive notions of gender and racial equality. They practice communal living where all property was shared. They did not believe in procreation and lived their lives in celibacy.

However, of all the beliefs and practices of the Shakers, the one that sticks with us today is their commitment to living lives of simplicity. For the Shakers, simplicity was not just a way of life, it was a manifestation of their faith. Simplicity was evident in every aspect of their lives from work to worship. We see it today reflected in their design style and architecture. Their craftsmanship is simple, yet elegant. It was a Shaker belief that to make something well was in itself an act of

prayer. Order, simplicity, industriousness, communal living, and making the ordinary things beautiful were all critical aspects of Shaker living.

In addition to beautifully austere tables and tall-backed chairs, the industrious Shakers are responsible for a number of inventions including the wooden clothespin, the circular saw, the washing machine, and the flat-sided broom (like we use today).

The Shaker movement in the U.S. peaked in the 1840s with about 6000 members across 18 communities. However, the movement mostly evaporated by the early 1900's due largely to their adherence to celibacy.

Today, I am continuing my Lenten sermon series called *Disciplines of Faith*. Through Lent, we are examining traditional spiritual disciplines that can aid us throughout the year, but especially in our journey to the cross. We have already looked at the disciplines of fasting and of solitude. Today, we are looking at simplicity.

So, what is simplicity? I believe that a biblical answer can be found in the book of Ecclesiastes where we read *God made human beings straightforward, but they have devised many schemes* (Eccl 7:29). As one bible translation puts it, *God made us plain and simple, but we have made ourselves very complicated* (Good News). In other words, God made us simple, but we have bungled God's intentions with all of our needless complexities. To return to our natural state, we need to invoke simplicity.

On the one hand, we can attain simplicity through the obvious reduction of our possessions. We have too much. It is commonly said that we spend the first part of our lives collecting things ... and the second half getting rid of them. I, myself, am at that halfway point where less is looking a lot like more. As one writer put it, "We buy things we do not want to impress people we do not like."

The Christian discipline of simplicity is about more than our stuff, about more than a Spartan lifestyle. Christian simplicity is about our priorities. As a Christian, our priority should be pursuing the kingdom; the kingdom should be the focus of our lives. As Jesus says, *Seek ye first the kingdom of God* (Matthew 6:33). We don't lead simple lives to obtain the kingdom, but when we truly seek the kingdom, when the kingdom is the focus of our existence, the excesses of our lives become secondary. Jesus offers a parable of the kingdom saying, *The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field* (Matthew 13:44). When we glimpse the kingdom, we will do whatever it takes to obtain the kingdom. When we glimpse the kingdom, our lives become centered. Distractions take a back seat.

A moment ago, I read about a man who approached Jesus wanting to know how he might achieve eternal life. In other words, he wanted to know how to obtain the kingdom. Jesus reminds the man of the commandments that God has given us. The man says that he faithfully has kept these commandments since he was a child. Jesus tells him to go and sell everything he owns and give the money to the poor. Then, Jesus says, you will have *treasure in heaven*. He also tells the man, *Then come, follow me*. Jesus is telling this man that if he had indeed followed the commandments of God with his heart, he should have no trouble giving away his possessions because they would be incidental to his pursuit of the kingdom. His treasure is the kingdom, not his wealth. At that point, he will be in a state of mind to follow Jesus. This man, sadly, could not take that step because he had a lot of stuff. His wealth defined him. Its complexity kept him perpetually distracted from God's kingdom.

During Lent, it is traditional for Christians to fast, to give up something. It might be ice cream, chocolate, sodas, red meat, coffee. We can use these moments when we desire that which we have given up as reminders of our relationship with God.

Simplicity, on the other hand, is different from fasting. Simplicity is not about giving up, but instead living with what we need. Simplicity is about removing the distractions of our lives so that we are able to focus fully on God. For example, when you are driving a car, do you like to have the radio blasting as you read texts on your phone and apply makeup while you eat a breakfast burrito? Or is it better that you remove all distractions and focus on the driving? Yes, it is possible to do all those things and not crash, but you also know, in your heart, you are a better driver when you are not distracted. We are better Christians when we are not distracted and can focus on our faith.

Simplicity is not about going without. Nowhere in scripture does God call us to starve ourselves or suggest that we must be miserable. God is the God of abundant life, the one who wants us to have our *daily bread*. We live in a consumer society where more is better. God calls us to a kingdom where enough is better. God wants our hearts to be not with our possessions but with the kingdom. When we are distracted, we are breaking the commandment not to put other gods before our God. Distractions become idols.

Simplicity is not a discipline that we can just jump into. It is a commitment; it is a way of life. However, it is possible to start small. As your Lenten devotion this week, I invite you, I urge you to focus on practicing simplicity. Each day, starting this afternoon, set aside time to eliminate one distraction from your life. Clean out a drawer, organize your socks, recycle your unread magazines, give away clothes you don't wear. Whatever you do, do it not as a chore, but as a prayer. Do it not for yourself, but for God. As you work, focus on the kingdom. Focus on the joy of being

able to focus on the kingdom. As part of your prayer, you can even sing the song that has been gifted us by the Shakers, the song we call Simple Gifts.

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.