

EMBRACE SIMPLICITY
Philippians 4: 10-13; Matthew 6: 19-21

I love bookstores; I loved the book sale held at the church last week. But I have a problem: my bookshelves are full! Do you collect things like books too? As an English Major in college, I read lots of books and now I often find illustrations in books for sermons. So the minute I donate one, it seems, I find that I wish I had it still! What a dilemma! Clearly with the successful storage businesses all over Florida, others are saving many things too! If we don't manage our belongings while we are healthy, time or illness creeps up on us and they become the problem for children or estate sale personnel. My parents had a wonderful two story 4 -bedroom house to raise their 4 children. We certainly appreciated our home; it even had a full basement, with a fifth bedroom that Dad built for us. But his health declined rather suddenly; and my mother had a stroke and had to move. They had things in their home that they thought were treasures. The children got items they could reasonably move and then a person was called in to sell or dispose of the rest. We were instructed to take whatever we wanted beforehand, but on the day of the sale we could not show up and we could not call. He knew the tears or anger people would show if their treasures were sold for a pittance or if they got donated. *But that's what happens to people's treasures.* Shortly after moving to Florida in 1985, I went to an estate sale in Deland and bought a beautiful piano for \$500. Almost all of us are guilty of holding onto things until we have an illness or we have to move or downsize. Then we learn how much treasure we have stored. As this series of sermons considers spiritual disciples, living more simply is something that I need to embrace, at least in terms of what I have collected. Jesus looks straight at me, and maybe at you, saying "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and rust consume; ... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven." [Matthew 6;19-20]

Yes Lord. But how do I store my things for heaven? “Silly,” Jesus might say, ‘There is nothing physically here that you will need in the hereafter! There you will find that what we treasure is love, kindness, joy and other qualities that honor one another! If you want to get a jump on heaven, stop treating your earthly things as treasure, and start treating *those* qualities as treasure! Do not wait for your last breath to decide to live with Kingdom living!’ Jesus speaks right to me today; perhaps he speaks right to you too. So I am beginning the difficult (for me) process of starting to give away books I may not refer to again. Sigh. It is hard to do! Like those in Ukraine having to leave most of their possessions behind, in some cases to learn that their home has been bombed and destroyed. Or those aboard the Titanic who struggled to not take their jewelry or beautiful clothing into the freezing water, leaving photos and treasures behind can pull at our hearts. Or those in Iowa this week whose homes were flattened by a ferocious tornado. All that was treasured in this life, gone in an instant. The simple life is sadly forced on many.

Years ago there was a group known as the Shakers, famous in part for the song we used in our Call to Worship today and being played as our offertory; “Tis a Gift to be Simple.” What made them live such a simple life when others struggle to do so? An online article referenced the “United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing, more commonly known as the ‘Shakers.’” They are a “millenarian restorationist sect,” which means they wait for, and expect, the imminent return of Christ. They were called “Shakers” because of their charismatic, ecstatic movements during their services of worship. But they had an agenda of being “simple living people:” they were getting ready for that great day when they would board the celestial railroad and have the conductor say “Leave your things behind! We can just take you now!” Or Jesus flying down to help them fly away and saying to them and us; “I can’t carry you and all of your boxes! You’ll have to

leave them!” The Shakers already grieved saying goodbye to their earthly treasures so they could embrace the heavenly ones. What a great example. At some point we, or those who we leave behind, will have to go through the arduous sorting process to see what of our belongings to give, what to keep, and what to sell. It seems Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount teaches us several ways to embrace simplicity. “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

In her *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, Adele Ahlberg Calhoun writes: the purpose of simplicity is to “uncomplicate and untangle my life so I can focus on what really matters.” Two of the God-given fruits of simplicity, she states, are “creating more space in your life for loving and serving God,” and “staking your identity in God’s love, not accumulations and possessions.” [Downer’s Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2005, p. 84] We could shift our focus from dish collections, or card collections, or record collections to the Savior who has already gone to Heaven. He is with us spiritually even now, and whispers words of encouragement to us: “You won’t have those things, nor want those things in heaven. *Trust me.*” And so we try, like Shakers, to sell or give away some of our possessions. A few people in the world give away all that they have and join a monastic order or a commune. Sometimes they stay, sometimes they don’t. Jesus practiced what he preached. He had nowhere to lay his head that he could call his own. He traveled with a band of brothers, staying where they were invited and welcomed. There was no estate sale in Jerusalem or Bethlehem or Nazareth when he died. There were memories, however, and visitors still choose to monetize their visits with souvenirs from those places where Jesus was. The apostle Paul, like his Lord Jesus, was always on the move, just staying

where he was welcomed. He wrote to the Philippians: “I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty.” Perhaps the Great Depression made you a saver; perhaps you know how to live with next to nothing, or you have known the traps and taxes of abundance. You know your own life! Listen to the guiding words of Jesus, the one who you one day may get to meet. Maybe, like the Shakers, we would be wise to start living a simpler life. This afternoon I plan to start sorting books to give away.

Let us pray:

Holy God: our human society is so capitalistic that we get caught up in buying and possessing. Help rewire our souls to look at the things Jesus describes beyond the sunset, things that will not rust or spoil, but will instead sustain us in eternal life. Thank you for having Jesus show us the true Way, and the Truth, and the Life. Amen.

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