

Langley Mennonite Fellowship, August 24, 2003: Simple Living

Narrator: So one day a woman came up to Jesus and declared her undying loyalty to him. Jesus didn't appear really all that impressed, which caused the woman to be not a little taken aback.

Woman: Jesus, did you not hear? I'm yours. You're everything I want. I'll join with you right after sis' wedding next month!...

Narrator: *But Jesus walked away from her, because she just did not get it.*

Narrator: Another wannabe follower approached Jesus with an offer he couldn't resist!

Man: Jesus, I'll give you up to half of all my possessions, bank accounts, and piggy bank with real gold pieces inside.

Narrator: *But Jesus walked away from him because he just did not give it... (all)!*

Narrator: Still another would-be disciple accosted Jesus from a distance, yelling at last he'd found the **One Person** offering just the kinds of teachings, wisdom, and insights he'd been looking for all his life!

Man: Jesus, you're my guru! You rock! You say all the right words! I'm with you 100% of the way!

Narrator: *But Jesus pulled away from him, and the young man quit following right away.*

Narrator: Then a certain woman came to Jesus and said:

Woman: You're liberation movement is exactly the cause I've been looking for all my life! And I've been into endless causes ever since College. I and my sisters have been the downtrodden for untold generations! I want to join with you on your march to freedom!

Narrator: *But Jesus just kept on walking as if she was not even there. She soon stopped trying to stay in step.*

Narrator: Another woman, from an ethnic minority with a terrible disfigurement came up to Jesus, having noticed the woman who fell away. She declared:

Woman: She is white, monied, and privileged. I'm non-white, I'm broke, and have been an abuse victim all my life.

It is time for their comeuppance! We have been oppressed and abused at every turn! Surely you will now wreak terrible vengeance on all our oppressors!

Narrator: *But Jesus, though drawn to her plight, turned and headed in the opposite direction without saying a word.*

Narrator: Later, Jesus felt drawn to the crowds gathering around. A spokesman approached out of the throng:

Spokesman: Teacher, lots more would follow you if you could only tone your message down a mite. I mean, a guy's gotta find some pleasures in life, and, you know, live free of guilt! Whay d'ya say?

Narrator: *But Jesus had nothing to say, especially nothing at all about guilt, and walked away.*

Narrator: A man who had been attentively listening to Jesus for a long time approached, began to follow, but still did not speak up. Finally:

Man: Jesus, your message of peace is just my piece of cake! I've been haranguing our government leaders and anyone else who'll listen for an absolute age! I jam their e-mail boxes with the call for peace, God only knows! I harp on it at every turn, and stuff it down anyone's throat in range. Surely they'll get it someday! I just plead: 'Give peace a chance!'

Narrator: And the man made the peace sign. *But Jesus did not return the gesture, said rather, "Man shall not live by bread or e-mails or peace marches alone!", and passed him and his computer by.*

Narrator: A person of the opposite sex who looked like Jesus approached him, and fell in step as he walked along. She said:

Woman: Lord, I think I and my brothers and sisters who sent me to you *get* your mission, unlike so many others. We come from a long line of religiously persecuted, practise simple living, are committed to peace, and eat wholesome Farmer's sausage... We've left other churches because of their persecution, and have no truck with their "off-the-wall" religiosity.

Narrator: *But Jesus walked away once more, saying something about not being 'of Paul, Apollo or Menno'...*

Narrator: *And Jesus said, to no one in particular, but to everyone in general: "Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple."*

Meditation

Esther: This business about simple life style may not be so simple after all! Wasn't it Bonhoeffer who wrote: "When Jesus calls a man to follow him, he bids him come and die."?

Wayne: So it's a paradox then, this simple life stuff. We find life by losing it. We discover freedom by signing our lives over to Another. We embrace joy in co-suffering with a groaning creation. We embrace simple living, and find it terribly confusing.

Esther: And what is this "treasure" we Christians claim to cherish, that ravishes our heart, according to Jesus?

Wayne: One day Jesus was trying to compare the treasure, the Kingdom of heaven, to life experiences. He said:

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it. Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away (Matt 13:44-48)."

Esther: I still don't get it, and how it's connected to simple living! Wouldn't it have been so much easier had Jesus just made up a check list?

Wayne: Okay, let's try one. Start with, well anywhere. Shoes! How many pair may you have? Will they be new Clark's or Thrift Store vintage? How many thousand pair did Imalda Marcos have? She was Catholic, right? Is it different for Protestants?

I don't know about you, but I'm already bogged down – just with shoes....

Esther: Okay, scratch the check list idea. Surely though there is some kind of objective standard...

Wayne: How do you objectify the heart?

Esther: What did Jesus say, exactly?: *"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matt 6:21)."* I guess it sounds pretty subjective to me...

Moving right along, what's this business about "light" and "darkness"? How can light turn out to be deep darkness as in: *"But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!"*

Wayne: Isn't that a bit like Jesus a little later in Matthew's Gospel, talking about the religious leaders of his time? He goes: "*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are* (Matt 23:15)." I thought religious converts were the "good guys" according to Jesus, and believing in Jesus is supposed to be about embracing the light, not the hell and darkness...

Esther: So, maybe it's just plain dangerous being religious at all! Like another place in Matthew that Jesus says: "*Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit* (Matt 15:14)." Again, he's talking about religious church types who all will take a dive.

Wayne: Okay, this is taking us far enough afield from simple living, isn't it? How does this all connect?

Esther: Point is, simple living, it seems, has everything to do with the heart, and precious little with religion, no matter what stripe!

Wayne: Now what about Jesus' juxtaposition of "God" and "Money" in the text? Doesn't the Bible say somewhere, 'love of money is the root of all evil'?

Esther: Not quite! I just happen to have that passage open in front of me, and it goes like this:

"But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue [justice], godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness (1 Tim 6:6-11).

There's another even blunter and more succinct passage:

"Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.' (Heb 13:5)"

Wayne: So how much money may I keep? What about a savings account? What about a good salary? What about buying Lottery Tickets? What about eating out and how much and often? The questions are endless! Everybody needs money! And if I agree with one thing Karl Marx taught, surely it's not love that motivates people, but the Almighty Dollar!

The war in Afghanistan was not about altruistic regime change for the oppressed, but 5 trillion dollars of oil and gas reserves in the Caspian Sea, and a trans-Afghanistan pipeline to the Arabian Sea! Same thing in Iraq, with the second largest oil reserves on the planet. Black gold that has dominated the world since the Industrial Revolution! And

soon to be in Saudi Arabia, just watch! And water resources are becoming the Liquid gold of the Middle East, and soon of the entire world. Who controls the oil and water rules the world. (And they say oil and water don't mix...) You tell me that's *not* what life is all about on the planet...

Esther: I won't, then. I'll let Jesus do so instead:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal (Matt 6:19-20).”

Wayne: But what does that mean? How do we know when we are, or are not doing that?

Esther: I think my dad had some handles on simple living, and not storing treasure where it should not be.

Wayne: Ah, good old Papa Thiessen, bless his soul!

Esther: Uh, his name was “William Fairholm” of recent Children's Story fame, and he was *English* and *Plymouth Brethren* through and through!

Wayne: Well, how could he be simple living then? I thought it was just the Anabaptist Mennonites who were!

Esther: He became a Christian in his late teens, and felt the call to preach the Gospel all over northern Alberta, not in the limelight where the Big Guns go. Based near Westlock, northwest of Edmonton, for years he travelled by horse and buggy to remote parts of the province to invite people to come to know Jesus. Later he used a car. Dad also never received a salary and thus he never had to pay income tax. But our family also never lacked for anything. Only years later did I know we were *technically* poor people!

Dad's faith was simple; his trust in God was straightforward; and the only thing we had besides food and clothing was a house dad built on an acreage – along with a few cattle, etc.

Wayne: I understand you didn't know they'd even invented TV until you were in your 20's....

Esther: I know a lot more than you think! But true, we never had a TV in all my growing-up years. Dad was simple living, and kept that up until he died at 88 years of age. Though he did eventually come to relish watching all kinds of sports on TV!

Wayne: I'd have to say he mellowed with the years, and died a very contented man, without question!

By most standards, he was a real "Fundy"! But he was the Real McCoy also. He also refused military service in World War II. He was one of those rare Fundies who actually believed that *verbal inspiration of the Bible extended to the words of Jesus!* If Martin Marty, noted church historian, had written about your dad as he once did an exposé of Fundamentalists in an essay entitled "Fundies in their Undies"... he'd have, I'm sure, found the authentic Simple Lifestyle marks of a Follower of Jesus in your dad. At his funeral, Christian and non-Christian alike at an open mike attested to that.

Esther: Well, I'm really not that much clearer on "Simple Living". I know the line from Tony Campolo that we're to "live simply so that others may simply live". But I still don't know how to tell whether or not I'm doing it!

Wayne: Let me try out one other thing from our main passage. That's worry. Some of us are naturally anxious. Me for instance! I come by it honestly from my mom. Worry, anxiety, all wrapped up with perfectionism coloured my mom's approach to the faith and life. Me too so often.

Elizabeth O'Connor once wrote that Jesus came to save us as much from our fears as from our sins! That surely means worry too. How did one of our passages put it?:
"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God (Phil 4:6)."

Esther: The same person who said "Fear not" more than once to his disciples also kept hammering away on our worries. In this context in our passage today, Jesus gives the antidote to worry:
"But seek first his kingdom and his [justice], and all these things will be given to you as well (Matt 6:33)."

Wayne: So, "all these things" according to Jesus include eating, drinking, clothes, longevity, and the future.

Luke Johnson in *Faith's Freedom* puts it this way:

God not only creates the world out there, but *my* world at every moment. More than a theory about the world in general is involved. I confess that I am held out of nothingness at every moment, that my continuing in being is a gift which never becomes my possession. We do not need elaborate analyses of cosmic forces to prove God's existence and power. The most effective existential proof is to place a finger to one's temple. Feel the thin wall of flesh that separates us from nonbeing. Feel the pulse of life beneath the skin that we can neither control nor perpetuate by our own desire or power. All we need do is acknowledge that we are at every moment a breath away from death,

and that the breath we take this moment is a gift we cannot give ourselves (p. 19).

Esther: So just what is simple living then?

Wayne: In the end, it is at least three things:

- First, *heart* comes before anything else. And the heart is where our treasure is. Do we, in fact do what Jesus says, love God above all else? One author wrote:

The Jesus of Matthew's Gospel did not say that the greatest commandment was to *believe* in God and love humanity. He did not say that we should be nice to one another because that's the way God would like us to behave. He said the first and most essential thing is to *love God* with a paramount love. It is the most hackneyed notion in the world, but once or twice in a lifetime its dulling familiarity vanishes, and one feels for a moment the unfathomable significance and centrality of Jesus' suggestion for breaking the grip of sin and death: to *love God*. (*Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads*, p. 272)

- Second, it is *not being controlled by the Almighty Dollar* or any other of our possessions or desires, but being in control of them. Like the story of the Amish Bishop who explained they're not necessarily against technology, but the telephone is in the booth down the road just to show who is boss! But careful here: we can so readily deceive ourselves. The positive statement on this is, as in all other aspects of Christian spirituality: "*Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God* (Heb 12:2)."
- Finally, we're not to *worry* nor *be afraid*. We are not condemned when we worry and are fearful, only invited to be free of worry and fear... *The positive corollary* is Paul's words to the Thessalonians: "*Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus* (1Thes 5:16-18)."

Esther: So this simple living thing isn't all so simple as it's cracked up to be! In fact, it's endlessly demanding, and takes a lifetime and beyond to even begin to get it right!