

THE JOY OF SIMPLICITY NOVEMBER 1 2009  
ST. LUKE'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
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During the month of November we are going to be thinking about our current economic situation and how we can find joy and meaning in our lives in spite of the financial challenges many people face.

This morning we will think about the joy of simplicity, how we might live more simply and actually discover more joy in life.

Jesus discovered in his own time that there were many people who thought that the most important thing in life was the abundance of their possessions. Consequently, the New Testament is filled with admonitions to put God and God's gift of life ahead of gaining more possessions.

In Mark 8:34-37 Jesus tells his followers that they will need to deny some of their ego's desires in order to have an abundant life. Here is how Mark puts it:

Read Mark 8:34-37: *He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?'* WHAT WILL IT PROFIT THEM TO GAIN THE WHOLE WORLD AND FORFEIT THEIR LIFE?

In Luke's Gospel Jesus puts this matter even more simply:

Read Luke's 12:15: *And he said to them, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.'* ONE'S LIFE DOES NOT CONSIST IN THE ABUNDANCE OF POSSESSIONS.

Finally, Paul writes these famous words of advice to his young friend Timothy:

Read 1 Timothy 6:10: *For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.* IN THEIR EAGERNESS TO BE RICH, SOME HAVE PIERCED THEMSELVES WITH MANY PAINS.

Let us pray.

Everyone is aware of the economic crisis that we have been through in the past year and which is still affecting millions of Americans.

Rev. Adam Hamilton, pastor of the Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City has written a book entitled *ENOUGH* in which he reports on an American Psychological Association survey of 7,000 American households. This survey found that 80% of the people in this country are stressed about the economy and their personal finances.

Fifty six percent are concerned about their own job stability and 50% are having sleeping problems because of their concern about finances.

Clearly, the economy has been taking its toll on the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health of people nationwide, and in many parts of Indiana it is even worse because of the continuing high rate of unemployment.

I realize that there are some signs of improvement in our economy but if we don't learn some important lessons from our experience of the past year and a half, we may well find ourselves in the same predicament in the future.

Two brothers once came to Jesus and they were fighting over the inheritance from their father. Their father had died and these two sons could not agree on how they should divide their father's estate.

Jesus does not tell them how to divide the estate but he saw that the underlying problem causing the conflict was each brother's greed and desire to have more possessions for themselves. Jesus responded to these brothers by saying to both of them:

**BE ON YOUR GUARD AGAINST ALL KINDS OF GREED; FOR ONE'S LIFE DOES NOT CONSIST IN THE ABUNDANCE OF POSSESSIONS.**

You see, greed tells us that the most important thing in the world is the abundance of our possessions, but Jesus tells us that our lives are much more important than what we own.

In the history of the Christian church personal greed and the overwhelming desire for more possessions has also been identified as one of the seven deadly sins which causes ruin to people and societies.

St. Paul writes to his young friend Timothy these words: **THE LOVE OF MONEY IS THE ROOT OF ALL KINDS OF EVIL.** Paul does not say that money is the root of all kinds of evil, but the overwhelming love and desire for more money at all costs is the root of much of the evil in our world.

Paul goes on to say that our eagerness for more possessions has pierced us with many pains.

Our eagerness for more possessions over the past decade has pierced our society and millions of people with many pains and caused us many problems.

You see Jesus and Paul do not look simply at the surface situation or the particular issue of the day but at the underlying spiritual issues which have led us to this situation and they point to the role of greed and the desire for more that has brought us to this current situation.

Now I know it is easy for us to point out the problems of greed and the desire for more possessions in other people; we can all point to the greed on Wall Street or among highly paid CEOs but the truth is that the desire for more is a temptation in all of us.

We have developed a society which is called the immediate gratification society. When we see something we want it whether we can afford it or not and we buy it with a credit card and then we discover we can't pay off our credit card debt at the end of the month so we go further and further in debt.

The average American has at least \$10,000 of credit card debt at the end of each month on which they are paying about 18% interest. About a third of the people pay off their entire credit card debt at the end of each month so that brings down the average considerably and the actual indebtedness of many credit card holders is much higher than \$10,000.

Every time we see an ad on television or in the newspaper it is intended to convince us that we need this new product or car or truck, and will be much happier if we have it, and we can buy it for just a few dollars a month on credit. Soon we find ourselves with more possessions than we can afford or need.

In fact, as a society we have so many possessions that we don't need that we can't store them all in our houses so we rent self-storage space in other buildings to store them. Self-storage space in this country is increasing rapidly and today there is 2 billion square feet of self-storage space for the things we bought that we no longer use or need.

I have to confess that I am sometimes an impulse shopper when it comes to shopping in a grocery store. My wife, Minnietta, is recovering from surgery so she has been making out a grocery shopping list and I have the opportunity of doing all the grocery shopping. However, when I go into the grocery store I see all of these attractive displays for food and it is so tempting that I just put things spontaneously in the shopping cart without much thought as to whether this is something we actually need or not. Sometimes I buy things that are on sale where we can get two for one price whether we need it or not.

When I get home and empty all the bags, Minnietta looks at my purchases and kindly asks: "What were you thinking when you bought this; is this something you thought we needed?"

And I have to confess that I didn't really think about it very much, it was attractively displayed and it was on sale so I bought two of the items that we didn't need in the first place. So I understand our impulse and desire to buy things we may not really need. We will both be so glad when Minnietta is well enough to do the grocery shopping again and only buy what we really need.

I suspect that I am not alone in my impulsive shopping in a grocery store but this problem of buying things we don't really need and getting bigger homes and bigger cars and more expensive vacations than we can afford is at the root of much of our financial problems today.

The truth is that more things don't make us happy. I read an interesting statement recently which said that the suicide rate among the very wealthy, movie stars and other very wealthy people is higher than the suicide rate among the very poor. Obviously just having more wealth and material possessions does not make us happier people.

Jesus put it this way: What does it profit a person if they gain the whole world and lose their own life? What good does it do to have all these material possessions if we do not find joy and meaning in our lives?

What is the spiritual solution to some of these problems? I would like to suggest that the solution is to discover the joy of living more simply.

We will all find more joy in life when we don't look for fulfillment in getting more material possessions and are able to discipline our spending habits so that we live within our means and reduce the stress of debt and find joy in living more simply.

Mel Torme once wrote a song entitled *THE BEST THINGS IN LIFE ARE FREE* which has these words:

The moon belongs to everyone; the best things in life are free;  
The stars belong to everyone; they cling there for you and me,  
The flowers in spring, the robins that sing,  
The sunbeams that shine, they are yours, their mine.  
Love can come to everyone,  
The best things in life are free.

The truth is that we cannot find joy in getting more material possessions beyond our basic needs but we do find joy in the simple gifts of experiencing the moon, stars, sun, flowers and birds and the love that God has for all of us.

Recently, I was driving down a street near our house and I saw this huge tree where the leaves had all turned yellow and the sun was shining behind it and light was reflecting off of each leaf and it was spectacularly beautiful. I was so impressed with this beautiful scene that I just stopped my car at the side of the road and sat there in awe and wonder at the blazing beauty of this tree with bright yellow leaves. I just sat there thanking God for this wonderful moment of beauty that God gave me free of charge.

Last week, Minnietta and I saw a doe and her fawn grazing in the woods next to our house and we both just sat in front of the window in silence for about ten minutes admiring their beauty and graceful movements. It felt like a holy moment and a free gift from God that money can't buy and it gave us a sense of joy and peace. Simple joys like this are always around us if we slow down and enjoy them.

The best things in life, like enjoying God's beautiful nature with people you love, are free and there is much joy to be found in these simple pleasures. The truth is that some of the best and most beautiful things in life are simple gifts which are freely given to everyone.

Thinking about the joy of simplicity reminds me of the statement my debate partner made at the beginning of every debate match. He would say, "My partner and I are very humble and simple people. I'm humble; he's simple." I think there is a joy in living more simply and enjoying the simple gifts of life.

There is a contemporary saying which says that we should learn to live more simply so others can simply live. If we live more simply, if we don't buy things we don't need, if we live within our means without unnecessary debt we would have more resources to share with those in need around us.

I know that many people would like to give more to support God's work in the world and to help people in need but they are so far in debt and so anxious about their financial situation that they don't have the resources to help others.

If we lived more simply we would enjoy life more and be better able to help others simply live. If we lived more simply we would discover that we already have enough and simply getting more will not bring us joy or peace in our lives.

Our symbol for our gratitude to God campaign this year is an apple. You all received one of these apple refrigerator magnets in the mail recently to remind us that according to Psalm 17:8 we are all the apple

of God's eye. When you say to a child you are the apple of my eye, it means you are very special and important to me and when God says to each of us that we are the apple of his eye, it means that we are all very important and special to God and God holds each of us close to his heart.

You will notice that this apple on the magnet and on our Time magazine is made up of four different colored apples. For the next four Sundays we will be giving out a different colored apple each Sunday to remind us that even though we are all different each one of us is the apple of God's eye.

The apple we will give out today is yellow and it is to remind us of the joy of living life more simply. Yellow is the simple color. So when you take this apple home with you or when you eat it, let it remind you to live life more simply, to remember the best things in life are free, and to live simply so others might simply live.

You may have noticed that I have ten of these yellow apples on a table up here. These ten apples represent all that God has given to us. They represent all the time, talent and treasure we have; they represent all of the love God has shown to us in giving us our spouses, children and grandchildren our resources and our very lives themselves. These ten apples represent all that God has given to us.

Now, as a way to express our gratitude to God for all of these gifts, God asks us to give one apple back to God to support God's work of sharing the Good News about Jesus Christ with others in this community and around the world.

God has given us all ten apples to use conscientiously as we choose and only asks for one apple in return to share God's love and compassion for others in the world. This is what it means to tithe - to give one tenth of all God has given to us back to God as an expression of our gratitude for all the gifts of life God has first given us.

However, we may want to buy a new, more expensive house or car or something else and we have already committed the other resources God has given us so we have to take part of God's apple to help pay for our new possessions. Then we want to buy the latest electronic gadget or big screen television, so we have to take more of God's apple to help us purchase it. Then we want to take an expensive trip or vacation so we take even more of God's apple to use for our own desires.

Eventually, we don't give God back a tenth of all God has first given to us. We use all the other nine apples to provide for our lives and then use most of God's apple as well then just give God the left-overs after we have gotten all we want for ourselves. Because we have overspent our resources on things we often don't really need, we have very little left to give to God who gave us everything we have in the first place.

If we all learned to live more simply and just purchased what we really need and not all the things we want, we would experience more joy in living and have less stress over indebtedness, and we would be able to give a tithe to God to express our appreciation to God for all that God has first given to us.

In a church I once served there was a grade school teacher who had never married. She devoted her life to teaching and caring for the children in her classes. When there was a child from a poor family that came to school without a coat or gloves in the winter, she would take them to a second-hand store and buy them a coat and gloves personally so they wouldn't be cold on their walk to school. If there were

children who couldn't afford school supplies, she bought school supplies in bulk so all of her students would have what they needed to do their school work.

Personally, she lived very frugally and simply. I visited her home once in the middle of the winter and she came to the door with a heavy sweater on. I went in and discovered that it felt fairly chilly in her house so she invited me to keep my coat on. Eventually I asked if something was wrong with her furnace and she explained that the furnace worked fine but she liked to keep the thermometer low in the winter to save on fuel costs so that she would have funds to pay for the poor children who came to her class.

She was also an active member of our congregation, tithed her meager income to support God's work, and whenever there was a special offering for a special need her gift was always among the largest given. When she died she left her house to the church in her will.

Her funeral service was simply packed with former students who deeply appreciated her sacrifice for them and with people in the community that she had helped over the years that no one knew anything about.

When people got up to speak about her life they always mentioned her great generosity but also her great joy in living. They remembered her great sense of humor and how she seemed to find joy in every situation. She never saw herself as suffering or sacrificing because she lived so simply. She lived with a deep sense of joy and fulfillment in her life because of her faith in God and her love for others. She knew and demonstrated the joy of living simply so others might simply live and she experienced the joy of simplicity.

My prayer is that all of us will evaluate our own lives and discover how we might live more simply so that we will have more to give to help others and, when we do that, we will discover a deep and lasting joy in our lives.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century there was a sect of Christians called the Shakers who were known for living frugally and simply. They are famous for making sturdy and solid shaker furniture which has no flourishes on it but is beautifully finished wood with excellent craftsmanship. The Shakers were also known for the singing and dancing they did in their worship services and for their joy in living. Their joy and simplicity is best known in a Shaker song entitled *SIMPLE GIFTS* written by Elder Joseph Brackett in 1848. Shakers would dance in a circle and sing this song:

'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,  
'T WILL BE IN THE VALLEY OF LOVE AND DELIGHT.

We have asked LOREN WALAWENDER to sing this song for us and for KARINA HAMAMOUCHE, a student at ANNETTE PETTIGREW'S dance studio to dance to this simple music.

As you listen to this song and watch this dance, think about the joy of living more simply so others might simply live.

Let us pray.