

Simplicity: Stuff
Matthew 19:16-24

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn
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Do you remember back in the early days of the pandemic when we were all just trying to make the best of a bad situation? We were stuck at home, unable to see family and friends, trying to figure out how to work and then what to do with the rest of the day. Parents were doing everything they could to keep their kids focused and learning. Many people were fighting intense loneliness. We all spent a lot of time outside. Those were the days when people would write encouraging messages on their sidewalks in chalk, and everyone seemed exceptionally friendly as we passed each other walking on the opposite side of the street.

One of the things I remember is how everything slowed down. The pace of work was slower, the pace of life was slower. We spent more time playing with our kids, talking to our spouses, reading, learning new hobbies, and, perhaps more than anything, considering what was most important in life. People began unexpectedly quitting jobs or moving or getting engaged. We found ways to connect with the people we love through zoom rooms and outdoor gatherings. We connected with God and church through prayer, walking, and online small groups. In the midst of fear, uncertainty, and upheaval, we recognized what is most important to us. It wasn't possessions or money, status or climbing the corporate ladder. It was our kids and our parents, our friends, our faith, our own well-being and the well-being of others.

Fast forward to the fall of 2022 and life is back to its old hectic pace - perhaps even more hectic than before. Kids are back at school, most of us are back in offices, we stop at the grocery store on the way home or grab dinner from McDonald's. The chores are stacking up. There are dishes to wash, bills to pay, errands to run, kids' activities to attend, and still the constant questions, "Do I wear a mask? Should we return to the gym? When should I get the next booster shot?" Suddenly, we're losing that perspective we gained in the early months of c\Covid. It's disappearing under a mountain of obligations, desires, and pressure.

Today, we're starting a new sermon series entitled, "Simplicity", which I hope will help us reclaim some of that perspective. God has created us to live lives abundant in love, generosity, and beauty. Yet, so much of the time we get caught up in what society tells us makes for a good life - wealth, possessions, status. Imagine the freedom we would feel if we let go of even some of that to make more room for God, for love, in our lives?

This sermon series is also the foundation for our annual stewardship - or giving - campaign. You will be receiving an invitation to contribute to the church's 2023 budget early in November. The word stewardship is often associated just with giving. Yet, according to Rev. Becca Ehrlich in her book *Christian Minimalism*, which I highly recommend, "Stewardship is utilizing and managing all resources God provides us, to the glory of God and for the building up of God's realm on earth. Being good stewards means using what God gives us wisely and how God would want us to use our God-given gifts". Of course, I hope this series will encourage you to be generous in your financial gifts to the church this year, but just as important or more, I hope it will encourage you to be intentional how you use the gifts God has given you to make space in your head, in your heart or in your schedule for more of the life God created us to live.

According to Ehrlich, to do that, you will need to identify what is most important to you, intentionally remove or minimize everything else, declutter and get rid of stuff, commitments, and bad habits, and be intentional in how you consume and use goods, time, energy, and money. If you do this, the result will be the freedom of having more time, energy, and money to focus on what matters most!

I believe each of us has ways in which we can simplify our lives to make more room for God. I hope that in the coming weeks, you will assess your own life and consider what is blocking you from living according to your own values and living in alignment with God's kingdom values. Each week, we'll consider one area of your life you might focus on to find more freedom, and I'll offer practical suggestions for how to get started.

So, let's begin with talking about our stuff. Here is another memory from early in the pandemic for you. Do you remember all the empty shelves at the grocery store? Part of it was the supply chain issues that we're still recovering from today, but the biggest factor for a while was people's need to hoard. Not hoard as in the diagnosable mental disorder but hoard supplies they were afraid of not having. Toilet paper, hand sanitizer, face masks, cleaning supplies all disappeared for weeks if not months. People would post pictures on social media of their storage closets full and overflowing with more toilet paper than any family could possibly use in a year. Others would post pictures of the empty shelves when they got to the store and found the toilet paper gone.

Fortunately, we seem to be past that stage. In fact, I've seen people selling their extras on Craigslist and Facebook marketplace. But the whole situation points to some interesting observations about our relationship to our stuff.

Americans have a lot of stuff. To make my point, we spent \$39.5 billion dollars on self storage units in 2021. In fact, there are as many self-storage facilities in the U.S. as there are Starbucks, McDonald's, Dunkin Donuts, Pizza Hut, and Wendy's restaurants combined. Many of us have basements and garages full of stuff we don't actually use, closets and drawers full of clothes we don't wear. Yet, we don't get rid of it either.

Jesus spoke about how money and possessions can stand between us and God a lot. In today's scripture, a rich, young man asks Jesus how he can inherit eternal life. In scripture, "eternal life" refers not only to life beyond this life but to the quality of life we live here on earth. Eternal life comes with living as Jesus taught us to - loving God and neighbor, caring for the poor, advocating for the oppressed. Living with a focus on loving is what gives life meaning.

Initially, Jesus tells the young man to follow the commandments. The man responds that he already does those things and asks what he is lacking. Then, Jesus says, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When the young man heard this word, the scripture says, "He went away grieving, for he had many possessions".

I suspect many of us might have the same initial reaction. Our stuff gives us a sense of security. Yet, I think a lot of us get overwhelmed by our stuff. The more stuff we have, the more clutter and disorder surrounds us, which can make us feel edgy and anxious. We can't find what we need when we need it. Life feels out of control. We are more likely to become short-tempered

with family members, and we tend to feel guilty realizing we have so much when others have so little.

According to Ehrlich, “To really change how we function in relation to consumption...we have to find out what makes us live in excess in the first place.” In the case of the pandemic, our motivation was fear. We were living through something that was killing people and was completely outside of our control. We didn’t know who would get sick or when or why. Life had been turned completely upside down. So we took control where we could. We stocked up for “just in case”.

Oftentimes, what leads us to overbuying is that we are trying to fill a void. We feel this longing for something more, something that makes us feel satisfied. And so, we buy whatever product we think will make the difference and find after not very long, that having that thing doesn’t change how we feel at all. And so we become more dissatisfied until we buy the next thing...and so on.

Yet, when we take the time to consider what really matters the most, we realize that what we’re longing for isn’t any material object, it is what comes to us through God. We long to be loved, to feel valued, to make a difference in the world. We long for a sense of peace, of hope, of assurance. We long to believe that eventually everything is going to be alright, that good will win out over evil, that our children will thrive, that justice will prevail. These are our true values, and they are the characteristics of the kingdom of God.

So, what if we did what Jesus says? What if we sold or gave away some of our stuff? How would we feel? If you’re interested in trying, I invite you to join me in a thirty-day challenge. This idea comes from Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus on their minimalist’s website. They suggest doing this with a partner. I’d like to see us do it with as a congregation.

Here is how it works. Pick a starting date between now and November 1. Mine will be November 1 because I’m going on the civil rights pilgrimage next week. On the first day, get rid of one thing. Ideally, you will give it away or sell it. If you sell it, you commit to giving the money away. If you can’t give it away or sell it, then you promise to get rid of it in an environmentally friendly way. On the second day, get rid of two things. And on the third, three. On the fourth, four. And so on until you get to thirty. You can imagine that it starts to get hard as you get into double digits. Challenge yourself to see how long you can last. If you want, take a picture of what you are getting rid of each day and put it on the church’s community Facebook page. You can inspire others by your example! It will be exciting to see if anyone makes it all the way to thirty!

The point of this exercise is to make ourselves think intentionally about what we really need. When we clear the cluttered spaces in our lives - heads, hearts, or kitchen shelves - we make more space for God, for love, for what matters most, and we strengthen our trust that God will provide for us.

May it be so. Amen.