

“Simple Gifts: Jubilee”
Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11; John 1:6-8, 19-28
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I. Introduction

My family and I watched a wonderful old Erol Flynn movie on Friday night called “The Prince and the Pauper,” which is a Mark Twain story. One of Mark Twain’s friends was an American essayist and novelist named Charles Dudley Warner who is perhaps most famous for saying, “Everybody complains about the weather, but nobody *does* anything about it.” He was a wonderfully thoughtful essayist and made this comment about simplicity, “Simplicity is making the journey of this life with just baggage enough.”

We are in the midst of looking at the art and call of simplicity during these weeks of Advent – the art of carrying just the necessary baggage. And we are engaged in this exploration for two reasons: The first is that Advent has become a time in our culture of such obscene extravagance, that reflecting on simplicity provides some important balance. The second is that we are in the midst of the most serious economic crisis since the Great Depression, and it is important for us to look at how our habits of consumption as a nation have contributed to this predicament.

Over the past couple of weeks, as we have reflected on simplicity, I have noted that simplicity is both a grace and a discipline. It is a grace, because it is a gift that God gives us, transforming our lives in ways that keep God and God’s call central to us. It is also a discipline, a set of practices that prepare us to accept this gift.

Simplicity has both inward and outward dimensions. The inward dimension has to do with singleness of focus. It’s about paring down our internal noise and focusing on God. It’s about letting go of the busyness that we cling to because it gives us the illusion of being in control.

The outward dimension of simplicity has to do with paring down the excess baggage of our lives. It is about detaching from our addictive need to acquire and consume. It is about recognizing it as an addiction, an attempt to fill an emptiness in our lives that can only be filled by God. Detaching from our addictive and acquisitive behaviors allows us to live more fully, and also in ways that make fullness of life more available to the rest of the world. Or as it is said, “Live simply so that others may simply live.”

II. The Jubilee

One of the ancient tools in the Hebrew Scriptures for combating our thirst for acquisitiveness was the tradition of the “Year of the Jubilee.” In our passage from Isaiah this morning, the Jubilee is denoted in the phrase “the year of the Lord’s favor.” The original

command for the Jubilee is found in Leviticus 25, as is part of the section of Leviticus that we refer to as the “Holiness Code.”

Sabbath, as you all know, played a very critical role in the life of ancient Israel, and the basic term refers to the day of rest that we are commanded to take every week. But there was also a Sabbath given to the land every seven years. In the seventh year, the land was allowed to lie fallow, to replenish and rejuvenate itself. And after seven cycles of the seven year cycle (49 years), in the fiftieth year, the Hebrews were commanded to celebrate the Jubilee.

In the Jubilee year, not only was the land to lie fallow, but metaphorically, the clock was set back and everyone got to start with a clean slate. On the Jubilee year, any Jew who had been forced to descend into slavery was freed, all debts were cancelled, and any land that had been sold during the previous fifty years reverted to the original family of ownership.

Do you see what that meant? It meant that no one could accumulate property permanently. It meant that no one was permanently in bondage – legally or by virtue of their indebtedness. Everyone started with a clean slate.

Scholars have discovered similar traditions in the cultures that surrounded Israel, and they are always associated with royal decrees. Often when a new king came into power, it made sense to issue a decree canceling debts, because then you didn’t have to worry about the disputes about who owed what to whom that took place during your predecessor’s reign. So this year of Jubilee carries with it overtones of a royal decree, the sense that the advent of the king allows everyone to start anew.

So it makes perfect sense that when Jesus is introducing his ministry – and proclaiming the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God – in his first sermon at Nazareth, he chooses this passage from Isaiah to explain to people what he is about. His ministry is going to be about preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, and about everyone starting with a clean slate, with all of their debts erased.

Because, the Kingdom of God is being ushered in through the ministry of Jesus, – just as when a new earthly king came to power and debts were erased – so too, with the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God, everyone gets to start with a clean slate.

III. Living Out of Jubilee

So what does that all mean in terms of our call to simplify?

One thing it means is that if we are to live in the Kingdom that God is inviting us into, we need to let go of our need to accumulate more and more stuff. John D. Rockefeller was once famously asked how much money it would take to be really satisfied. He answered, “Just a little bit more!” And most of us carry that illusion around with us: if we have just a little bit more, our lives would be complete.

So we go about acquiring all of this stuff that we don't need, and often even forget that we have. I suspect that most of us over the past couple of weeks, as we have pulled out Christmas decorations, have opened boxes and said, "Oh, I forgot I had that (whatever "that" is)! And carried to its extreme, this habit can get incredibly scary. There is a famous case study of two reclusive brothers by the name of Collier who lived in a large house in New York. They accumulated so much stuff – crazy amounts, like 14 grand pianos -- that they had to walk along little paths in their home. One of the brothers eventually died when a mound of his stuff fell on him and suffocated him.

While that's an extreme example, I would suggest that many of us are being suffocated by our stuff, and Jubilee is about letting that go.

A related call in the Jubilee is the call to honor and celebrate Sabbath. Just as Mr. Rockefeller articulated that feeling most of us have of needing "just a little bit more," most of us feel that if we just did a little bit more work, we could really get everything under control. If we could just "take an hour and get those e-mails under control," if we could just "get that report done," things would feel more manageable. But it never does, does it?

Jubilee was a "super Sabbath" and highlights the importance of stepping back from the busyness of our lives. Quaker author Richard Foster says that "Sabbath rest strikes at the heart of the urge to get ahead." Sabbath is about acknowledging that ultimately, we are not in control of our lives: God is. It is an admission, that completely contrary to how it feels, that extra hour – or an extra day – of work is not going to make everything else fall into place. What would it be like to unplug, to turn off the computers and the blackberries and celebrate a day of quiet?

Frankly, I can't tell you, because I'm lousy at it. But it's a call in the Jubilee that's worth listening to. And Advent is a good time to try.

Third, Jubilee is a proclamation that debts are forgiven. I think that there are a couple of messages for us there. One is that we need to be freed from the burden of debt; many of us are burdened by debt that is entirely avoidable. Not all debt is avoidable, but much is. A survey of consumers in 2007 found that a third of those surveyed were carrying debt from the Christmas of 2006. We are crushing ourselves under a weight of debt to buy things that other people don't really want or need.

How else could we demonstrate our love for the people around us this Christmas that wouldn't involve charging things on our credit cards? How about the gift of time spent with someone? As a parent, I can tell you that very few gifts would be as valuable as a night of babysitting, so parents could have a date. Be creative, look for ways to celebrate that don't involve a cash register.

One last point about debt: for a number of years now, the concept of the Jubilee has been used to call for canceling debt for developing nations. There was a big push for this eight years ago, when the new Millennium was rolling in, which was only moderately successful. But there is a lot of consensus among liberal and conservative economists that unpayable debt is crushing

developing countries, and that we (in the developed world) need to just let it go. There's no way to dig out other than that.

If we're going to benefit from Jubilee, we need to share that benefit with the rest of the world.

IV. Conclusion

Retired Bishop of Edinburgh Richard Holloway has written, "Simplicity, clarity, singleness: These are the attributes that give our lives power and vividness and joy as they are also the marks of great art. They seem to be the purpose of God for his whole creation." Our call from Isaiah this morning is to take seriously the gift of the Jubilee as a tool for bringing some simplicity into our lives. It's a call to live out of the Kingdom that has been ushered in through the work of Jesus Christ. It's a call that can bring our own lives wholeness as well as wholeness to a broken world.

Amen.