

## **“Simple Gifts: Detachment”**

2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16; Luke 1: 26-38

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### **I. Introduction**

John Bogle, the founder of The Vanguard Group of investment funds, tells a story about a party given by a billionaire on Shelter Island, New York. The host, a hedge fund manager, had invited a number of celebrities including the authors Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller. And Kurt Vonnegut happened to mention to Mr. Heller that their host had made more money in a single day in his hedge fund than Heller had earned from his novel Catch 22 over its entire sales history. Heller responded, “Yes, but I have something he will never have ... enough.”

We have been focusing this Advent season on what constitutes “enough”: on our call to Christian simplicity. Simplicity is a gift and a discipline that involves paring down the needless excesses of our lives so that we can both live our own lives more fully and so that people around the world can share in the abundance of God’s creation.

I refer to simplicity as a gift, because God grants us a heart of simplicity as an act of grace. But I also refer to it as a discipline, because it is a set of practices that position us to receive this gift. These disciplines are both internal and external: both spiritual and material. They have to do with quieting our internal noise so that we can give focus to that “still, small voice” inside us, and paring down the external baggage we carry so that we can live in the freedom that God desires for us.

### **II. The Freedom of Simplicity**

Freedom is at the heart of our lectionary passage from 2 Samuel this morning. Its writer, whom Biblical scholars call the “Deuteronomist,” starts this passage by noting that God had finally given rest to David from all his enemies. David’s kingdom is firmly established, and he can finally take a breather. And to his great credit, David appreciates all that God has done for him, and he wants to find some way of honoring and thanking God in return.

So David decides to build a temple to house the Ark of the Covenant and as a home for the Divine presence. He consults the court prophet, Nathan, who also thinks that it’s a good idea. But that night, God grants Nathan a dream and tells him to dissuade David from building the temple. And listen to his words, “For I have not dwelt in a house since the time that I brought the children of Israel up from Egypt, even to this day, ... I have moved about with all the children of Israel.”

David wants a place for God’s “name to dwell.” And there seems to be a sense in God’s response that God understands that desire as an attempt to domesticate and control God’s presence. The issue here is divine freedom.

It's easy for us to get tied down by our stuff, in ways that inhibit our ability to live with freedom and with power. And we live in a society that encourages our being tied down. The media that surrounds us has as its primary purpose to teach us to want, to increase our desire. Its goal is to turn our healthy response of "That's really extravagant" into "That would be nice to have." And from there we move to "I want that," and ultimately to "I need that."

And this process starts from the moment that we are born. The average American child watches 40,000 commercials a year. In her book, Buy, buy, baby, journalist Susan Gregory Thomas notes, "When your inner life is so informed and shaped by the rubric of marketing, it's almost impossible to disentangle yourself." She goes on to quote fellow journalist John Seabrook, who has written about "the voice of marketers" that many Gen Xers internalized during a childhood bathed in television commercials. "Marketing no longer seems like an alien, external, manipulative force," Seabrook says. "Rather, it's just part of your world."

The call to simplicity is the call to detach from this compulsive need to consume, to purchase, to demonstrate our love through the gifts we buy. The call to simplicity is the opportunity to release ourselves from our slavery to our stuff, and to step out into the wide and expansive freedom that God offers us.

### **III. Tools for the Journey**

So where do we start this process of detachment? I have a couple of suggestions. The first is to be mindful of where our areas of vulnerability are. Are you particularly vulnerable to the impulse buy when you're in the check out line? Is your Achilles' heel as a parent or grandparent, things that are billed as "educational"? Can you not resist a "Get 3 for the price of 2" sale? Pay attention to where marketing hooks you. When you can name it, you can start to avoid it.

The second suggestion is to start small. We are not going to transform ourselves or our country overnight. Americans will spend roughly \$450 billion this Christmas. How often do you buy a Christmas presents for no other reason than obligation? How many gifts have you received that were simply purchased out of that same obligation? We all have some of those purchases still to do. What would happen if we bought one less of them? Just one less gift. My siblings and I used to exchange names for gifts, and this year my sister said, "What would you think about just not buying gifts for each other this year?" We all loved it. It's a small step, but it was an incredibly freeing one.

Lastly, we can engage this process as a community. Last year, the Boston Faith & Justice Network started economic discipleship groups in churches around the Boston area. In these groups, members draw up and share their household budgets. (Yes – people share real numbers with each other about household income and spending.) They commit to personal lifestyle changes – eating out fewer times each month, avoiding impulse buys. Then groups select a recipient for a collective gift – drawn from the participants' commitments to spend less. What a fabulous model: we detach from our compulsive need to consume, and share that savings with vulnerable people who need it. Cody will be starting a similar group next month here.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

A couple of weeks ago, the day after Thanksgiving, at a Walmart store on Long Island, a 34 years old man – a temporary worker – was trampled to death by shoppers as they rushed into the store when it opened. I don't know what could possess people to literally step on another human being in the rush to buy discounted stuff. But it feels like a powerful metaphor for what goes on in our country during the Advent season.

The call to simplicity is a call to step away from that mad rush, to allow the Holy Spirit to release us from our slavery to consume, and to celebrate the coming of Jesus again as the simple gift that it is.

Amen.