

The First Baptist Church, Midland  
March 14, 2010 – Four Sunday in Lent  
Matthew 6:19-20; 19:16-26

***Simplicity: A Pearl From the Gospel***  
Thoughts for the “Tools For the Journey” Lenten Worship Series  
Theme: Simplicity  
A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick

I remember well my first 17 years in South Plainfield, NJ. Life was quite simple. Our house was teeny-tiny. In fact, take a look. I got this off of the Google Map. I assure you it didn't look like this when I was growing up. It has been enhanced considerably. But this is the house of my growing years.

What you see is four rooms. The front left was my mom and dad's bedroom and on the right you see the living room. Behind the living room was the kitchen and behind my parent's bedroom was my room. Next to it was the bathroom. We did have indoor plumbing. My single bed fit in my room and you could just about walk around it. My parent's room was huge with space for a bureau for my mom and a small chest of drawers for my dad.

The kitchen had a table with four chairs and a refrigerator. And of course, there was a sink. We also had a dishwasher (me). The living room had a sofa and two chairs. And eventually we had a TV though I can't remember how old I was when that exciting addition made its way into our lives. Oh yes, the living room was also the accordion studio.

Connecting it all together was a small hallway into which each room's doorway opened. And in that hallway sat our telephone on a tiny table... our four-party line telephone. There was nothing upstairs but rafters and a catwalk about two feet wide. And there was a basement which housed an old oil heater and a big drum on stilts which held the heating oil. Have you ever seen that wonderful movie, *Christmas Story* with Daren McGavern? He's the dad who's always working on that old furnace trying to get it right. It made a racket and was always belching large puffs of smoke. That was our furnace. Oh yes, there was also a washing machine with that fancy roller assembly down there. And I had a bar-bell with about 60 pounds of weights down there, too. You've probably wondered all these years how I got this dynamic physique. Now you know... It all started in that basement ☺

Our neighborhood had a lot of hard working folks and no one had a lot of money. Old Mr. Skodal lived behind us and he always had the fanciest car. Remember that great movie, *Driving Miss Daisy* with Morgan Freeman playing Hoke, the chauffeur? Well, Mr. Skodal was a chauffeur. He'd drive over to one of those well to do neighborhoods in Westfield every day to take his employer over to New York City. And just like Hoke, he got the old car whenever his boss traded up... which was quite often. He was the envy of all the dads in the neighborhood.

There were a mess of kids growing up on Geary Drive and Florence Place back then. Remember, this was the 50's and 60's and while we didn't yet have a name, the “baby boomers”

were on the way. Our neighborhood schools grew like crazy and I remember walking to school every day. I never had to ride a bus to get to school.

Why am I sharing this little portrait of life in South Plainfield back in “the day”? I suppose I’m trying to paint a picture of *simplicity*. I have to tell you... life was simple back then... at least from the perspective of a child growing up. Now my parents who were trying their hardest to make ends meet probably felt a little more pressure. But the truth is we simply didn’t have a lot of stuff to get in the way. And that eliminated a lot of worry.

I think this is what Jesus was talking about in his Sermon on the Mount. Right at the end of his sixth chapter, Matthew includes the teaching from Jesus about making your way through life. *Don’t worry about what you are going to eat or drink or wear, Jesus is saying. God cares about you as he does all of his creation and you’ll make your way. So don’t worry about tomorrow. Just take care of today and tomorrow will take care of itself. Today’s trouble is enough for today. The important thing is to focus upon your spiritual grounding and that will help you to put all the other pieces in their proper perspective.*

This is essentially the message of simplicity. I think Jesus is saying we should be living with intentional balance in order to find a life of greater purpose, fulfillment and satisfaction. (Duane Elgin, Voluntary Simplicity) In other words, things do not lead to great tranquility or peace in life. That’s a myth. To the contrary, more often than not they lead to a desire to accumulate more which often distorts our values and priorities and we wind up with additional worries. The things that ultimately lend centeredness to our being are of the soul... they are spiritual. Simplicity calls us to live with more sincerity on the inside and less pretension on the outside. I believe this is at the heart of Jesus’ message.

Isn’t this essentially what he is saying earlier in this same sixth chapter (verses 19-21)... *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

I’ll say it again... it’s all about balance in life... seeing to it that we place our spiritual values – our faith – in the center of all we do. For when that happens, everything is kept in balance. And of course, this is brought home by a third illustration from Matthew’s gospel (19:16-22).

The rich young man visits Jesus and is living with the assumption that he can earn his way into heaven. *What good deed must I do to have eternal life?* he wants to know. And because Jesus is a good Jew and perceives the young man to be a good Jew he simply says *keep the commandments.*

*But which ones?* he wants to know. Jesus rattles off the list and the guy says, *I’m good. I’ve kept them all.* But you see, he was still empty on the inside. He lived in wealth and obeyed all the rules but it wasn’t getting it done. He sensed his spiritual grounding was still missing something. And Jesus said, *Okay, here’s the deal. Your problem is you’re too caught up in your*

*possessions. Get rid of them. Sell what you have and then give the money to the poor. Then you will be centered and you will have a sense of peace. Then, you can truly follow me.*

Then Matthew hits the home run. He defines clearly the reason for this young man's aching heart. He says, *When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.* In other words, his possessions were preventing him from entering a genuine relationship with God. They stood in his way. His life was out of balance.

We have to be so careful of being trapped in the cult of this thing and the next thing, don't we? If we could only allow God to share the present moment with us we'd enjoy so much more satisfaction with where we are in life. When you come right down to it, simplicity is born out of a divine center and as Richard Foster says this "is the only thing that can sufficiently reorient our lives so that possessions can be genuinely enjoyed without destroying us... The spiritual discipline of... simplicity sets us free to receive the provision of God as a gift that is not ours to keep, and that can be freely shared with others." (Celebration of Discipline, pg. 74).

It all comes back to what Jesus taught, doesn't it... *Seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness and all we need will be added in proper order.* When you come right down to it, it's really pretty simple.

Having said all this, I'm going to close with a challenge and a story. On Wednesday evening when we come together after sharing another wonderful supper, we're going to focus in some very practical ways upon the outward expression of simplicity and one of those expressions is going to be related to addictions. Now we're not talking about the classic forms of addiction that fill the headlines... alcohol, drugs, sex. Most of us can pretty confidently say *I don't fall into that trap. I'm clean.* Then we walk away feeling pretty good.

But you know, we probably all have some place in our lives where we are a little over the edge in our accumulation. For me, that addictive behavior takes place in a store called Barnes and Noble. I confess that I'm a book-a-holic. One of my passions is reading. Just walk in my office and it's obvious. There isn't room on the shelves for another book. And it's the same at home. We have stacks of books sitting on the floor because the shelves are filled.

Now we come to the time for true confessions. As I've been preparing for this series of worship services, my conscious has been pricked. I've decided that I am going to begin seriously addressing this issue by cutting down my library. I'm going to share some of my books with you, some with a young colleague in the area who is new to the pastoral ministry, and I'm going to give others to the Baptist Seminary in Managua, Nicaragua. Many of the students are bilingual and will be able to make good use of these resources.

So now I turn it to you... where are those places in your life where you can simplify in an effort to make this world a better place for others? We're going to talk about that on Wednesday evening during our "lab time". And we're going to visit a number of other possibilities that can help us to become more grounded and centered in our effort to be spiritually focused. But now I'm going to close with a wonderful story taken from the life of Vince Lombardi.

Lombardi was, as many know, the famed head coach of the Green Bay Packers. He knew the game of football. But on this particular day, Lombardi faced a difficult challenge: where to begin after a humiliating defeat. There was little he could say to his team that hadn't already been said. There were few aspects of the game they hadn't practiced and analyzed extensively. The men were professionals. They knew their performance on the field the day before had been atrocious. They knew their performance bore no resemblance to their game plan. They were angry, frustrated and disappointed, to say the least.

So it was in his remarkable manner that Lombardi met the challenge head on. He walked into the team meeting with the familiar oblong, leather ball, and went directly to the heart of the matter. In a deliberate manner he brought everyone's attention back to the basics with five simple words: 'Men, this is a football.' One of his players who understood exactly how badly they needed to review the essentials spoke up, 'Hold on, Coach, you're going too fast!'" (Dann Spader and Gary Mayes, *Growing a Healthy Church* ((Chicago: Moody Press, 1991)), 13)

Sometimes a person just needs to get back to the basics. Sometimes it pays to start over again. Sometimes you need to simplify life in order to regain focus upon the things that really matter.

Amen and AMEN!