

You Asked for It: Living More with Less?

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Text: Luke 10:38-42

I can't swear that this story happened in our Sunday School, but I'll tell it and you decide. The Sunday School teacher had asked the third graders to draw a picture that showed what they would like to do if Jesus came to spend a day with them. After they'd been busy for awhile, one little girl raised her hand to ask a question: "Teacher, will you tell me how to spell 'Legacy Village?'"

What do you think? One of our kids? Today's sermon request comes from a member who is a mother, a public school teacher, and a Sunday School teacher. She wrote of her concern about the materialism of our society, and its harmful effects on all of us but particularly on children and young people. Her words: *"They have a strong sense of entitlement. They lack anticipation and creativity, because they don't have to wait for things. They don't know when "enough" is enough."*

Well, acorns don't fall far from the tree. We have only to look around at the culture in which we're immersed to find convincing reasons why this might be so. We grown-ups, after all, have been the architects of a society in which value has been reduced to a commodity to be purchased, acquired, and possessed. We swim in a sea of advertising designed to sell us things that promise to make our life good. Our culture measures success by a trinity of appearance, achievement, and affluence serving primarily to promote insecurity: Am I attractive enough? Rich enough? Successful enough? Am I enough? -- which in turn stokes a ravenous consumer hunger.

And we are starving, stuffed with "things" that cannot satisfy. Our condition reminds me of when my son Paul was four or five years old and someone gave him an aquarium with several tropical fish. He loved to watch them, and the frenzy of activity when we'd sprinkle the fish food flakes on the surface of the water. The morning came, however, when we found two of them belly up. Before I could launch into a comforting speech about going to fish heaven, Paul grabbed the shaker of fish food and dumped about half of it in the water, saying, "My fish need MORE food!" We think that MORE will save us...more things, more money, more toys, more, more.

We live our lives, says author Frederick Buechner, from the outside in, rather than from the inside out [Buechner, *Telling Secrets*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1991].

The morning Scripture text suggests a different way, one that feeds our inside life, our spirits. It's the familiar story of Jesus in the home of his friends Mary and Martha, a story which unfortunately has been used to characterize Jesus' followers as either contemplative or practical and hard-working, and the Christian life more about prayer than action. What if instead it provides insight into a balanced life, a way of living more with less: less fear, less stress, fewer things? Listen for God's Word to us today in the reading from the gospel according to Luke, in the 10th chapter at the 38th verse. [Luke 10:38-42]

The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart. This bit of wisdom from, tellingly, Helen Keller, who was blind and deaf and perceived the material world through touch, reveals an almost-universally-held truth: that the best things in life aren't "things" at all, but intangibles that help us connect with one another and the deeper meaning within and beyond us. We know it, don't we? And yet how powerfully does our culture work to shake that foundational view of reality. Almost without consenting to it, we find ourselves in pursuit of things, trying with all our might to secure our lives with what may be seen and touched. We sometimes feel "locked in" to choices we've made because of the lifestyle we want. We adults measure ourselves against our peers no less than do our adolescents. Self-preoccupied and perpetually dissatisfied, we long to discover a road that will help us live from the inside out, that will nurture our spirits and help us savor the mystery and miracle of each new day.

The concept of living "more with less" flies in the face of our bigger-is-better culture. Somehow we've internalized the message that we'll only live more with more, and that anything less would diminish our quality of life. I think this is partly a reaction to what we have mistakenly attributed to our Reformed forebears, associating pleasure with sin, and making faith synonymous with an ascetic lifestyle that shuns creature comforts. But the Jesus we meet in the gospels does not fit in that category! During his earthly ministry, Jesus was criticized by the religious leaders for the enjoyment he took in eating and drinking with people. Seems he loved a good party as an opportunity to get close to others, to talk with them and listen to their concerns, and to show them What Really Matters.

Here at the dinner in Martha's home, he offers an alternative to the distraction she experiences from her many tasks. His words are intended not so much to be critical of Martha's focus as they are liberating. Jesus is not unmindful of the meal to be prepared (and eaten!), but invites Martha to reconsider the priority she's assigned it. Only one thing can hold first place, and Jesus gently suggests that food isn't it.

Far from diminishing life, choosing a spiritual priority will lead to abundant life. The "better part" of which Jesus spoke challenges our consumerism and materialistic values...in favor of a way that will bring true fulfillment...and a rich quality of life we didn't imagine possible. As a Buddhist teacher has noted, there are two ways to be rich: one is to have more money; the other is to have fewer needs.

A life held in relationship with God is one that is rich in soul, one that has fewer needs because at the heart of it is trust in a God who delights in giving, who blesses beyond measure, who provides the one thing most needed, which helps put other things in their rightful place. The Bible vision of the Kingdom of God is not anti-possession; just anti-excess. God knows we need our daily bread, but invites us to let go of the fear that impels us to hoard rather than share it. Colman McCarthy advocated what he called the "creative deprivation" of children; that is, keeping their senses and minds free of material goods that overwhelm them. Immersed in the sensory overload of internet and iPod, computer and PDA, television and time crunch, I think he might be on to something. What if we reclaimed the family dinner hour with all members present? Some families I know limit their children's time in front of television and computer—and their own! Others engage their children in discussions about the use of discretionary money. A thought-provoking children's book entitled "The Table Where Rich People Sit" differentiates between material wealth and the value of a simpler lifestyle that enables a family to "see the sky all day long and feel the wind and smell the coming rain? Or to watch a cactus bloom or to sleep outside under the stars?" Helping our children understand that the best and most beautiful things in the world are spiritual in origin is worth intentional consideration, and continual practice. They'll need to be, if they are to withstand the cultural messages to the contrary that are strong and persistent.

Notice that Jesus never explicitly identifies "the one thing needed," but in lifting up Mary's choice as "the better part" he seems to be saying that the way begins by listening.

Placing ourselves in the student's role, at the feet of our Teacher, helps us discern what is really essential. The two infants [we will baptize later this morning] [we baptized this morning] will need to be taught again and again and again that their worth is not derived from their appearance, their "stuff", their place in the pecking order. They are imbued with priceless worth by virtue of their identity as God's children. And they are loved unconditionally and eternally. And so, my friends, are we all. The faith community is a great place to be reminded of that first and most important thing, the one thing needed, in fact, to set us on a path that leads to life. Finally, friends, to live more with less is an enterprise of grace, of trusting ourselves and all we cherish to the One who is-- not our divine shopping center-- but our heart's true Home.

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE WHO CALLS US TO SHARE GOD'S
ETERNAL GLORY IN UNION WITH CHRIST, BE THE POWER FOREVER!
AMEN.

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