

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

19th Sunday after Pentecost
Year A

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Text: Matthew 6:25-33

Title: “Live Simply: Follow Jesus”

I can't tell you how many times friends, colleagues and acquaintances would give me a hard time about having a dumb phone. Friends would text and use an icon but my dumb phone didn't like icons and so the message was completely transformed into squares so I couldn't read the text nor see the icon. I would text back “dumb phone” to remind them and back would come something about what a dinosaur I was. Or I'd be in a meeting with colleagues and I'd pull out my dumb phone and flip it open to write a note or text somebody and I'd get laughter in the room, teasing me about my antiquated phone.

Yet, even before that when the cell phone began to become a “thing”, I had one of the popular Motorola flip phones that now look like the size of a small boat anchor. It worked and so I kept it for years, but again, people made fun of me for it. I wasn't keeping up with the technology and it showed.

So finally I gave in to my critics when my last dumb phone finally died, I finally picked up an iPhone 7, and now that I have it I confess I do like it but there is also something I don't like about it. It can be addictive, and I notice I'm not the only one. I was in Home Depot the other day and noticed a mother and her two teenagers shopping. The two teenagers both have their smartphones out, mesmerized by their screens, not talking to each other, ignoring mother as mom was searching the shelves for something. They didn't even notice when I walked by them they were so transfixed by their so called smart phones.

The thing is, now I get it--why they are so focused on this little device because I struggle with it myself sometimes. It can be addictive. So while I like the thing, I also miss the dumb phone! It was simpler and it did not demand my attention in the way the iPhone does. Like the sirens singing out for passing sailors of Greek mythology who only met their doom if they followed their song, these devices can detract from relationships and engaging in what the Apostle Paul calls “life that really is life”.

This next worship series will focus on living simply as a way to shape our lives as followers of Jesus. The view of Christian life in 1 Timothy 6:18-19 is a great place to begin:

“[The followers of Jesus] are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life

that really is life.” (1Timothy 6:18-19)

This is a series about stewardship, the kind of stewardship of life resources that lead us to taking “...hold of life that really is life.”

In the Gospel According to Matthew, Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount and he speaks plainly about the anxiety people experience when it comes to having what we need to live:

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink,^[a] or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?^[b] ²⁸ And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ ³² For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ But strive first for the kingdom of God^[c] and his^[d] righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.
(Matthew 6:25-33 (NRSV))

I wonder what the results would be if I asked you who in this room has never worried about having enough? Enough money? Enough car? Enough clothing to keep up with things? Enough mobile phone? Enough insurance? Enough time? Who in this room has never worried about having enough?

Isn't it an odd thing that in a culture like ours with so much abundance we still worry about having enough? We still feel anxious when it comes to the material in spite of what Jesus preaches in the Gospel According to Matthew, in spite of what the Apostle Paul points out to Timothy about what it means to follow Jesus.

Maybe in part it has to do with the way we measure worth. We use numbers to determine a person's or even a nation's worth. We talk about “net worth” when dealing with estates which is determined by adding up cash, investments, property and other assets like cars and jewelry and the like. Add it all up and that's what you and I are worth according to those who assist us with estate planning.

When considering nations the GDP is the tool used to measure and evaluate the worth of one nation relative to others. It determines the size of economies and is used to rank the value of those economies.

But is this kind of measuring really what God values when it comes to worth? Does Jesus rank the value of human life according to numbers like these?

To quote one scholar:

“The standards of being rich and storing up treasure cause us to mismeasure our lives. They lead us to unfreedom. How, then, should we take hold of the life that really is life? What makes for simple life? ...For Jesus the simple life is centered in his command: Seek you first the kingdom of God. Stewardship is for serving the kingdom of God, that is, the reign of God’s righteousness, God’s power of life over death in all its forms. For Jesus the secret of the simple life is loving God and the neighbor Jesus gives us. The simplicity of Christian life depends completely on the love of God that makes possible the love of the neighbor and the love of the neighbor that embodies the love of God. The freedom of the simple life is for the love of God and neighbor.” (M. Douglas Meeks, p.4, “Giving: Growing Joyful Stewards In Your Congregation”)

A lady went to the pastor and said “Pastor, I won't be going to this church anymore.” The pastor responded “But why?” The lady said “Ah! I saw a sister speaking badly of another sister; a brother that can't read well; the worship team living wrong; people looking at their phone during service; among so many other things wrong in the church.”

The pastor replied “OK. But before you go, do me a favor: take a full glass of water and walk three times around the church without spilling a drop on the floor. Afterwards, leave the church if you decide that’s the thing to do.”

The lady thought: too easy!

She walked three times around as the pastor had asked. When she finished she told the pastor she was ready.

And the pastor asked “When you were walking around the church, did you see a sister speaking bad about another sister?”

The lady replied “no.”

“did you see anyone looking at their phone?”

“No”

“You know why?”

“No”

“You were focused on the glass, to make sure you didn't tip it and spill any water. It's the same with our life. When our focus is on our Lord Jesus Christ, we don't have time to see the mistakes of others.”

“...strive first for the kingdom of God^[c] and his^[d] righteousness, and all these things will be

given to you as well.

It's not just the mistakes of others Jesus would have us ignore in order to give our full attention to loving God and neighbor, but it's also the worry about having enough that distracts us. It's being so absorbed by our possessions and keeping up with those possessions that we wind up being possessed by our possessions. We often find ourselves overscheduled, overextended, and overdrawn. Too many devices, too many toys, too many debts can drain our life energy in ways that keep us from more fully taking "...hold of life that really is life."

Patti Davis, pondered what it means to be wealthy in her Newsweek article July 29, 2002: She wrote:

Money really has nothing to do with wealth—not really. Wealth is a state of mind. Some of the poorest people I know are the people who have vast amounts of money. By contrast, I know some people who are working hard to try and earn more, who are always a bit short, but never hold back or act greedy. As far as I'm concerned, they are wealthy.

Remember Ken Lay's wife weeping on television about how much she and her husband have lost? Was there anyone who looked at her and thought, 'Ah, there's a prosperous, successful woman?' She may have been sitting in an elegant living room, surrounded by antiques, but all I saw was poverty—and not the kind she was trying to claim.

My paternal grandmother used to go visit tuberculosis patients in a sanitarium. She didn't have much money, but she felt that giving was important. She would not only give of herself, she would bring to the patients whatever she could afford—sometimes a note pad or pencils. Maybe just a card. She died when I was quite young, so my memories of her are limited and a bit grainy, like an old movie watched long ago. But when I think of her, I don't think of her financial limitations, I think of the richness of her heart and the generosity of her spirit. In the ways that count, she was wealthy.

I am certainly no Alan Greenspan; I have no expertise in predicting the financial future of this country. But I believe I'm right when I say that, as long as so many people are—metaphorically speaking—driving around with a bumper sticker that reads, As A Matter of Fact, I do Own the Road, we will never be a wealthy country.

We will have a healthy, strong economy only when we learn that greed might be an efficient way to make money quickly, but it will never make you wealthy. (Patti Davis, "Greed Will Never Make You Wealthy", Newsweek, July 29, 2002)

"Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Into the midst of the fear of not having enough, Jesus announces "Do not worry! God has provided for all your needs!" So what if your home is smaller than friends who have twice the

square footage! So what if your car is 10 years old while your sister is driving the latest Lexus! So what if your sofa is a bit threadbare and your parents' living room is filled with the smell of a plush new leather sectional! So what if ... you name it. So what if someone else has more than you do. Live simply. Focus on taking hold of the life that really is life. Focus your attention on loving God and neighbor. Give your heart to the One whose kingdom is revealed when one neighbor cares for another, when the value of a human life isn't measured in dollars and cents but by the heart that beats in the chest and the breath that gives rhythm to the life given by God alone. And rather than allowing yourself to be mesmerized by a small screen or obsession with maintaining your possessions, consider giving your attention to living as Paul, the apostle, counsels Timothy: "to do good, be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share."