

Simplicity (Part Two)

Blessed are the pure in heart

Reflection 13 in the series “The Last Great New Command”

It’s possible, even likely, that from Jesus’ Story of the Rich Fool recorded in Luke 12:13-21 one might conclude that rich people have a lot of problems. But now going back to the context of this story, it’s told in response to what? Or in response to whom? It’s told to a man asking Jesus to tell his brother to divide his inheritance with him, probably a younger brother feeling shortchanged by his older brother.

So it’s told in response not to the richer one, but to the poorer one. Do you see? Jesus just refuses to get mixed up in any dispute over money. He won’t do it. In essence, he is saying, “Who can judge whose greed is right?” And that’s the issue. That’s what it comes down to: Who can judge whose greed is right? Jesus’ concern is not so much that some have more than others, but that anyone obsessed with financial concerns cannot see God and, consequently, cannot find the way into his kingdom of love. So, “Watch out!” he says, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist of the things you have.”

Be on your guard against all kinds of greed: wanting what is not yours, always wanting more, more anything; a person who is not yours to have; an experience that is not yours to have; a status that is not yours to have; an outcome that takes you farther away from God’s church, God’s kingdom, God’s love; wanting your own way; wanting to assure your own security, to guarantee it so that you’ll have plenty of good things laid up for many years, wasting life with all this worry.

Learning to live a life of love begins with simplifying our lives – even our emotional lives, maybe especially our emotional lives. One of my favorite spots on earth is Walden Pond, and as often as we can when Debbie and I are in the Boston area we walk the mile hike around the pond immortalized by Henry David Thoreau. There is a classy gift shop across the road from the pond, and they sell these T-shirts, solid black or burgundy with only these words on them, “Simplify, Simplify.” They’re great T-shirts. My eye is always drawn to them. But they sell for \$15.00. And I can never figure out whether it would really be in the spirit of Thoreau to buy a T-shirt saying “Simplify” for \$15.00. Fortunately, a friend bought me one.

But learning to live a life of love does begin with simplifying our lives: Only the pure in heart, those whose lives are uncomplicated, simplified, undistracted, will see God. So in pursuit of simplicity, I will not pretend to be more knowledgeable than I am. I will not try to give the impression that I am better or worse than I am; I will not try to be more godly or more profane than I am (whichever gives me more status in that moment). I will work to live contentedly within my income; I will only acquire what I can afford and what my responsibility to the poor suggests. I will try to let unfavorable comments about myself stand, without any need to straighten the matter out. I will aim simply to do the right thing, regardless of what others may think or say. In pursuit of simplicity, I will be wary of all “timesaving” devices (they almost never do). I will try to do only one thing at a

time and make sure that I am present for it – whether taking a walk, washing dishes or really being with a friend. I will go fewer places in one day rather than more. I will see less so that I can see more. I will “do” less so that I can do more. I will acquire less so that I can have more. I will work to reject anything that creates an addiction in me. And I will shun whatever distracts me from life’s essential goodness.

There was a movie back a while ago called *Radio* about a high school football coach (played by Ed Harris) in a town in South Carolina who befriends a young man who is mentally handicapped (played by Cuba Gooding, Jr.). The coach allows Radio (that’s his nickname) to help with practices, stand with him on the sidelines, and even lead the team onto the field every Friday night. Some team backers, led by the banker in town, feel this has become a distraction to the team, and one night they are arguing their case where all such decision are made in that town, the local barbershop; they feel the coach should get rid of Radio and get back to just coaching football.

Then the coach walks through the door. He listens a while, and then takes the floor and says, “When I was younger, my coach once told me I had to figure out what’s most important in my life and stick to it.” He pauses and smiles, “I love football. I love Friday nights. I love figuring how to win on Friday afternoons. I love celebrating on Saturday mornings when it happens.” Everyone’s with him, and then he says, “But what’s most important here is how a town treats someone like Radio. And so I’m resigning as football coach.” Good move!

What’s most important, the main goal, is always learning to love, and that takes simplifying our lives so that we have time in our lives to love, space in our lives to live, and space in our minds to love. The world depends on this. Saving the world depends on this. It’s the only way we will have a world safe for our children and our children’s children, and for all the children of the world. When I was little, we used to sing, “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.” Did we really believe that? Do we believe that now?

Well, here’s where we are. God has given us a quest, we children of his who listen to him.¹ We have been given a mission that will demand of us every resource that we have, mental, spiritual, physical and financial. In the spirit of Jesus, we are to preach good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for captives, feed the hungry, welcome strangers in, bind up the broken-hearted, love even our enemies, and release the oppressed. This quest will take us far from the comfortable Shire, deep into the heart of darkness, confronting those who know only to hate and kill. We will be hunted and assaulted again and again. But we must go to set others free from their bleak prisons, to destroy the ring of power, and shatter the Dark Force in our universe.

O.K., that’s the The Lord of the Rings. But here is the lesson: You must not go alone. Evil will hunt you, and so a fellowship must protect you. Frodo doesn’t stand a chance without Merry, Pippin, Gandalf, Aragorn, Legolas, Gimli and Sam. You must cling to your spiritual friends; you must search far and wide for those you do not yet have. You must not go alone. Scripture is full of such warnings. You need a band of brothers and

sisters who understand the nature of our quest, and what is really at stake (learning to love, simplifying our lives so we can, for all the children of the world), spiritual friends who understand you and who will fight for you, and you for them.

To this we are called – to see the quest and to simplify our lives, hearts and minds so that we can set forth on the quest. God stuff, church stuff, cannot be just something that makes us feel a little religious, a part of our lives we pay attention to when all our other priorities are taken care of, when we've budgeted everything else, when we feel good about every other area in our life, when we've addressed every other concern. It's got to be a place where we are all helped to live a life of love, and where others can come to learn a life of love.

It begins with simplifying some things.

– Dale Pauls

¹ John Eldredge, *Waking the Dead*, 187.