



Make It Simple

A Resource for Stewardship Education and Annual Response

A RESOURCE FOR ANNUAL STEWARDSHIP RESPONSE

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A LIFESTYLE OF SIMPLICITY: ENTRY POINTS FOR THE CONVERSATION

Walter Brueggemann writes *in Mandate to Difference: An Introduction to the Contemporary Church*:

Jesus has come that we may have abundant life. His feeding narratives attest that the generosity of God is assured whenever Jesus rules in the earth and we count on that generosity. And that means, does it not, that our common practices of greed, of the pursuit of consumer goods, of the frantic effort to acquire more, are both inappropriate and unnecessary. Our society always hungers for more: more body surgery, more cosmetics, more cars, more beer, more sex, more certitude, more security, more money, more power, more oil. . .whatever. This hunger for more is a true sign that we do not trust the goodness of God to supply all of our needs; we do not trust that the generous rule of Jesus who has ascended to power is in effect. But we, we are Jesus people, and therefore we are pledged and empowered to act differently, differently in the neighborhood, differently in the economy, and as citizens of the last superpower, differently in the world. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007, p. 5)

Lifestyle, the manner in which people of God ought to conduct their lives, is a topic frequently explored in scripture. The Bible connects the faith that people profess to the ordinary details of how they live their lives. An overt example of this is the New Testament book of Ephesians which consists of two major divisions: Chapters 1-3 summarize the key beliefs of the early Christian community, and chapters 4-6 explore the implications of these beliefs for individual life and life in society. This second section of the letter begins, “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life

worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” (Ephesians 4:1) Followers of Jesus have a calling, a vocation not only to believe certain things, but also to live in such a way as to proclaim their trust in the God who created and redeemed them. Being a Christian makes a noticeable difference in a person’s lifestyle. “Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live.” (Ephesians 4:17a) The believer’s calling to embrace a lifestyle appropriate for a people given new life in Christ finds its shape in the example of Jesus himself. He was not addicted to material comfort, but rather practiced a freedom from self-gratification that allowed him to focus more attentively on caring for those around him. He invited his followers to join him in this lifestyle. “As they were going along the road, someone said to him, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’” (Luke 9:57-58)

Throughout the history of Christianity, communities of God’s people have struggled in various ways with issues related to manner of life. In the Constantinian era, devout men and women, concerned that many Christians were adopting the extravagances of their non-believing neighbors, fled to the desert to pursue an ascetic lifestyle. St. Francis of Assisi, according to tradition, rejected the materialism of his father and embraced a simple way of life free from dependence on possessions. The catalyst that encouraged him in this decision was a sermon based on Matthew 10:9-10, Jesus’ sending of the twelve (“Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food.”). One of the precipitating causes of the Reformation of the sixteenth century was Martin Luther’s strong reaction to the lifestyle excesses of the Medici papacy. Even today, a number of Christian groups such as the Amish monitor strictly various aspects of members’ dress and behavior and shun those who refuse to conform.

Lifestyle matters—particularly a yearning for a return to a simpler, less consumer oriented way of living—are on the minds of many contemporary Americans, whether or not they are people of faith. There is increasingly a tension between the world of marketing with its relentless quest to convince us that we need more, bigger, better and the inklings of thoughtful people that the unbridled acquisitiveness of contemporary American society is neither satisfying in the short run nor sustainable in the long run. Everything we own also, in a sense, owns us—as we find ourselves forced to take care of it and protect it, and ultimately replace it when it inevitably wears out. Our possessions both make things possible and place limits on our possibilities. People of conscience cannot help but notice that decades of conspicuous consumption have produced quite literally mountains of waste in the form of landfills that change the shape of the countryside. More and more evidence reminds us of various ways in which our addiction to comforts and possessions disrupts the natural rhythms of God’s good world and contributes to a growing inequality between those who have the means to

assuage their constant yearning for more and the many who barely can obtain what they need to survive.

The confluence of our faith tradition's message through the years regarding lifestyle choices and the contemporary interest in finding a sense of freedom from unrestrained materialism through simpler living suggest that this is an opportune moment to base a stewardship resource on the theme of simplicity. Such a resource, to be genuinely helpful, cannot offer superficial answers to challenges that confound all of us who are immersed in the values of our culture even as our faith calls us to struggle against them. Rather it can invite us into a conversation that names those challenges as obstacles that diminish our ability to experience most fully the life for which God created us. And it can remind us that we do not struggle against those challenges alone, since we are members of Christ and the community of his people.

The argument of Walter Brueggemann, theologian and professor of the Hebrew scriptures, in the comments above can be summarized as follows: The God we encounter in Jesus Christ is a God who provides extravagantly for us. Our insatiable acquisitiveness is therefore unnecessary and, at its root, suggests a lack of trust in God. This assertion is counter-cultural since we live in a society that urges us never to be satisfied, always to want more. As God's people, it is possible for us to replace the patterns of living that the world around us advocates with a lifestyle based on a celebration of God's generosity. We will examine the scriptural and theological bases of each of these assertions, focusing specifically on the New Testament record. But, please note, the same themes are present and prevalent in the Old Testament as well.

GOD PROVIDES

God provides. Not only does God take care of our needs. God provides for us in great abundance. Martin Luther, in his *Small Catechism*, describes effusively God's desire to give us what we need for daily living. In his explanation of the first article of the creed, Luther writes: "God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property—along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life." Commenting on the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer, Luther defines "daily bread" as

Everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, farm, fields, livestock, money, property, an upright spouse, upright children, upright members of the household, upright and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, decency, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.

It is significant that while some of the items in Luther's list refer to basic necessities, others refer to those things that make life full and meaningful. Clearly, Luther wants to stir in his readers a sense of excitement over God's beneficence.

In this way, the catechism is true to the message of scripture. The generosity and abundant provision of God are frequent biblical themes. Jesus, in his Sermon on the Mount, encourages God's people to expect great things from their maker.

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:7-11 and parallels)

At the conclusion of the first section of Ephesians, the author prays, "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen." (Ephesians 3:20-21) Philippians 4:19-20 echoes this sentiment: "And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen"

As in the catechism, the testimony of scripture to God's provision extends beyond the bare necessities. James 1:5 presents this invitation to believers: "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you." In John's Gospel, Jesus declares the richness of a life of faith, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10)

This life of abundance—including spiritual and emotional depth as well as material provision—is not a peripheral by-product of the Christian life. Rather it flows from the very center of our faith in the one who was crucified and raised. In his classic statement of the great exchange affected by Christ on the cross, St. Paul declares that Jesus took all of our neediness upon himself, giving us in return the confidence that he can provide for all of our needs. "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." (2 Corinthians 8:9)

THE YEARNING FOR MORE

The church in its worship life regularly acknowledges God as the giver of all good gifts. From where, then, comes the “frantic effort to acquire more” of which Brueggemann writes, an effort that characterizes not only the culture at large but the inclinations of many Christians? How can “God provides” be on our lips and “too much is never enough” seem like the operational principle of our lives?

In his letters, St. Paul writes of the Christian life as a struggle rather than a foregone conclusion, a journey rather than a destination. “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” (Philippians 3:12) In this journey, we often pursue on a visceral and instinctive level things that our heads tell us are wrong or unnecessary. “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” (Romans 7:15)

Appreciating Paul’s sense of struggle, Martin Luther reminded his followers that Christians are always sinners and saints at the same time. We remain sinners in our continued yearning to see ourselves as gods, as the center of our own universe, with limitless appetites and a sense of entitlement that our appetites be satisfied. This idolatry of the self promises us great things, but ultimately leaves us empty and craving for more. Yet, in Christ, we are also saints, loved and claimed by the one who died and rose for us. As we celebrate the new life that Christ offers us, we discover a possibility for richness in meaning that our self-idolatry cannot produce.

Christ invites us to struggle with our sinful inclinations and assures us that we do not struggle alone. In Luther’s ethical teaching, growth in righteousness means primarily growing in the appreciation of the paradox that we are indeed always saints and sinners at the same time and therefore never losing sight of how much we need the strengthening and forgiving presence of Christ in our lives. This presence gives us the courage to remain part of the larger world, susceptible to the influences of culture, but endeavoring not to embrace those influences uncritically.

At our best, we can be witnesses to a better way. It is a way not susceptible to the roller coaster ride of craving followed by momentary satisfaction when what we crave becomes ours followed by the inevitable disappointment that comes from pinning our sense of meaning to things that are transient. It is a way that evinces both a personal contentment that comes from our inner lives and the joyful freedom to focus our outer lives on the needs of others. As Jesus says to those who wish to follow him: “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.” (Matthew 6:19-21)

At our worst, we are still and ever subject to the same fears that lead people to seek security in things that do not last—fear of discomfort, fear of insignificance, fear of running out, and ultimately fear of death. Jesus encouraged his followers to grow beyond the anxiety produced by insecurity over material things.

Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:31-33)

He warned his listeners not to be seduced by materialism’s false remedy to their fears.

And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.’ And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:15-21)

Ironically, the unprecedented prosperity that characterizes the lives of so many Americans today seems to make our anxieties over wealth and possessions more intense rather than less intense. We feel that we have so much more to lose! (See Ecclesiastes 5:10-11.)

Our quest for a simpler and freer lifestyle will never be perfect. Like the father of the demon possessed child in Mark 9:24, we cry, “I believe; help my unbelief!” Martin Luther writes:

This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed. (*LW* 32:23)

The people of God can never claim with arrogance that they have arrived, but by the grace of God they are on the way.

EMPOWERED TO ACT DIFFERENTLY

What does it mean to be on the way? It means, in Brueggemann’s words, that we are “empowered to act differently,” counter-culturally, over against the self-focused, over-consumptive trends of contemporary society. It means that we have the possibility of stretching out our hands, not so that we can grasp even more for ourselves to assuage our perceived lack, but so that out of our abundance, an abundance that God provides, we can share what we have with others.

As was true in the life of Jesus himself, a lifestyle marked by simplicity flows directly and naturally toward a lifestyle characterized by generosity toward those around us. We become a giving people, a people who find joy and meaning in life not through what we acquire and cling to, but through what we let go of and share with others. St. Paul writes, “God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.” (2 Corinthians 9:8) Also,

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They 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. (1 Timothy 6:17-19)

As we “act differently,” as we replace the urge to grasp with the desire to give, we begin to experience at heart the contentment of which St. Paul writes to the Philippians. “I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:11b-13) The author of Hebrews reminds his readers what it is that gives us the freedom to abandon the relentless quest for more and celebrate what we already have: “Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you.’ So we can say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?’” (Hebrews 13:5-6) Our trust in God’s presence and abundant provision translates into the possibility of a lifestyle freed from the illusive pursuit of contentment through material acquisition. As Doris Janzen Longacre once said, “We can live more with less.”

Such a counter-cultural way of acting and being in the world may seem impossible to the individual, no matter how inspired by his or her encounter with the generosity of God. The desire to live as God has called the redeemed to live will naturally draw the individual closer to the encouragement of the community of faith. It has been said, “Christianity is a first person plural religion.” Even as we turn our focus from ourselves to our neighbors as the recipients of our generosity, we recognize that our neighbors in Christ can and should be a powerful source of support to us in our common struggle to embrace a simpler, more generous lifestyle. Acts 2:42-47 gives us a picture of what is possible when the community of God’s people functions as a source of lifestyle encouragement and support:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

The words, “encouragement” and “support” are significant. There is, of course, an element of the Law present in the call to lead a life that is consistent with God’s calling. Christians must face the truth that often they have divorced their daily choices and yearnings from the heart of their faith, leading them into the same overly consumptive lifestyles that characterize those of the crassest of non-believers. Repentance is a necessary part of learning to “act differently.” As Jesus says, “No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” (Luke 16:13)

Yet, at its core, the message about embracing a simpler and more generous lifestyle is far more about invitation than it is about scolding. If the Law makes us feel guilty that we have not been doing enough to share our abundance with others, the Gospel floods us with the joyful recognition that by the grace of God we have enough, and more than enough, in our lives to overflow into a new way of living. There is an honor implicit in the call to a life of generous simplicity, the honor of playing a role in God’s own work of giving for the sake of the world. James writes: “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.” (James 1:17-18)

THE BLESSING OF SIMPLICITY: INVITATION TO A CONVERSATION

Bob Sitze writes, “Simple living is part of stewardship, itself part of what Christians refer to as “the sanctified life.”” (*Starting Simple*, p. 40) That is, a lifestyle marked by simplicity—by an unqualified trust that we have a God who provides for all of our needs and an unwavering willingness to embrace the struggle of applying that trust to our habits of consuming and giving—lies at the heart of what it means for us to live as “the first fruits” of God’s creatures.

Given that affirmation and the contrasting realization that materialism has failed to keep its promise to provide meaning in life, a stewardship resource based on simple living could be a timely invitation for people of faith to explore intentionally issues that increasingly trouble them. How do we understand material wealth—as a gift from a gracious God to be received with gratitude and shared generously or as an entitlement to be used for our own gratification? How can we connect our lavish consumption of goods to the larger issues of pollution and the growing divide between the haves and the have-nots? How do we bolster our resolve to withstand the barrage of messages designed to play on our insecurities and make us yearn for more? How do we help one another appreciate the fact that we all wrestle with these same questions to one degree or another and that, like the prodigal son who “when he came to himself” was

welcomed home by the father (Luke 15:11-32), it is never too late for us to turn away from our culture's false answer to what makes life satisfying?

Framed not as scolding nor as a superficial prescription (simple living does not imply simplistic thinking) but rather as a faith-based conversation about wealth, possessions, and our vocation to live for others in response to the one who gave himself for us, such a stewardship resource will strengthen the individual Christian's relationship with God, with the surrounding world, and with the supportive community of faith. What better way can there be to invite God's people away from the fears and frustrations that are increasingly a part of our contemporary culture of materialism and proclaim the joy and meaning inherent in a life marked by contentment and generosity than by encouraging them to MAKE IT SIMPLE.