

“Simple, Not Easy”
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley
First Christian Church, Colorado Springs, CO
August 17, 2014

Isaiah 33:15-16 (The Message)

The answer’s simple: Live right, speak the truth, despise exploitation, refuse bribes, reject violence, avoid evil amusements. This is how you raise your standard of living! A safe and stable way to live. A nourishing, satisfying way to live.

Micah 6:8 (The Message)

But he’s already made it plain how to live, what to do, what God is looking for in men and women. It’s quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don’t take yourself too seriously—take God seriously.

Confession: I picked this sermon topic and scripture in a completely personal way. I don’t know if that’s really a condonable practice, but, here it is.

I knew Dean (Phelps) would be here, and on one of his albums he sings the song that we are going to sing together at the end of the sermon, “Tis the Gift to Be Simple.” I love this song, and I love the way Dean sings this song. And, it has become a favorite in American culture. It is compelling in part, I think, because of its message. Tis the gift to be simple. But, what does that mean? I wanted to explore that, so I took advantage. And, for the scripture...I did an internet search in biblegateway.com for the word “simple”, and these scriptures were the ones that most attracted me.

With all of that in mind... despite the random way it came together, I learned something, and I hope that God will speak to you through this message, as well.

So now, Dean, will you play “Tis the Gift to Be Simple” for us?

*'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gain'd,
To bow and to bend we shan't be asham'd,
To turn, turn will be our delight
'Till by turning, turning we come round right.*

Goodness, that's a beautiful song. I *think* what compels me about it are the images that the words bring to mind – the idea and image of *freedom* in a valley of love and delight – a valley that probably has green grass and aspen trees, and a creek, and birds – turning, spinning delightedly, taking in all the beauty around me. Freedom from responsibility, from the tragedies and evil of the world, freedom even from the evil within – turned away from sin and toward God so many times that it finally *stuck*.

That's an image, an idea that sticks with me. Following God, however many "turns" it takes, in a way that is completely satisfying, a way that can be called "delightful."

"Tis the Gift to be Simple" was composed by Elder Joseph Brackett Jr. in Alfred, Maine in 1848 as a Shaker "dance song" – not a hymn, not just for congregational singing. It was meant to be moved to, to be danced to, and for the movement and music and lyrics and singing all together to impact the singers, the dancers. It does not mention God, but it is a song for religious people, people who are seeking ways to be with God and to *delight* in God's gifts to us as well as our gifts to God.

It's interesting to me that the Shaker religion was a fairly unique one, and one that stayed small and died out relatively quickly, and yet, the questions they were asking, the things they were seeking, are so timeless, so universal, for humanity. They were *not* unique in their seeking love, in seeking joy. They were not unique in seeking to know what God had to say to them.

Questions about how to live in order to fulfill God's desires for the world have been asked for a long, long time. The two scriptures this morning are both answers to that basic question – what do I need to do to please God? I believe that there's actually another question behind that one. Humans want to please God because of our basic desire *to be happy*. And there is something inside of us that says that God can help us be happy.

One way humans have thought that happens is that God, the omnipotent ruler of the universe, can change things in our lives so that we suffer less. We also have developed a second

way that God and happiness connect – by pulling our hearts and minds emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually *in tune* with God, with something *delightful*.

I think we often try to do good things for God because of the belief that God will do good things for us – in other words, we believe that happiness comes from that first thing – God making our lives better – rather than the second, that our very *beings* can be pulled into *tune* with God.

In Isaiah, the verses preceding these describe a time when enemies and Israelites alike recognize God’s divine power – a power that was dangerous to mortals, and only some could look upon it. When that strength and power came, Isaiah says that “Sinners became terrified in Zion; trembling seized the godless: ‘Who among us can live with the devouring fire? Who among us can live with the everlasting blaze?’” (NRSV) The answer comes in the next verses, printed in your bulletin – “The answer’s simple: Live right, speak the truth, despise exploitation, refuse bribes, reject violence, avoid evil amusements. This is how you raise your standard of living! A safe and stable way to live. A nourishing, satisfying way to live.”

Then, several prophets later, we get to the book of Micah, and have another prophet, and another person questioning – how do I “get good” with God? Verses 6 and 7 say, “With what should I approach the Lord and bow down before God on high? Should I come before him with entirely burned offerings, with year-old calves? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with many torrents of oil? Should I give my oldest child for my crime; the fruit of my body for the sin of my spirit?” (NRSV) And then the answer comes – “he’s already made it plain how to live, what to do, what God is looking for in men and women. It’s quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don’t take yourself too seriously—take God seriously.” (Message)

Somehow, in both of these instances, the answer doesn’t seem to match the question. In Isaiah the question seems urgent, as if the fire is here and now, and something must be done immediately and finally in order to survive it. The answer, though, doesn’t sound so urgent. It doesn’t sound so immediate. Instead, *ways of living* are listed – things that take a long life of practice. The answer seems to be working on a different assumption – God’s power doesn’t

require an immediate, one time test or proof. What's needed *isn't* an immediate shelter from the firestorm. God's power requires *living, practicing*, meeting evil again and again and again and turning from it again and again and again. Does that sound familiar? "To turn, turn will be our delight, til by turning, turning, we come round right." In Micah, the question is about what can I give, what can I *bring*. The answer, again, isn't about what, isn't about a one-time fix, it's a list of *ways to live*.

In other words, the people asking the questions were thinking more along the lines of the first way of being happy – if I do this for God, God will do something for me – an equal tit for tat. The answer, though, comes in the second way of looking at it – happiness comes in the form of bringing our very beings into tune with God, something that takes practicing time and time again, constantly bringing ourselves back into tune with God when we get out of tune.

We seek God because we want to be happy. We want to live in that valley of love and delight. That desire to be happy could be seen as selfish, as self-interested, or self-centered. But, it's really not such a bad thing. Those things *are in* our very nature. We are built for survival, to protect our own self-interest. What *matters* is not whether or not you are self-interested. You are. You want to be happy. What matters is how you seek that happiness. And if it's by trying to follow God, trying to *please God* in order to get to a valley of love and delight, you're doing pretty well.

When we seek God, our happiness is gained through the happiness of others. So, how do we seek God?

The answer, as our scriptures suggest, is simple. The answer, as the *song* suggests, is actually *simplicity*, too. Seeking God is not complicated. And trying to bring *simplicity* to our lives has been shown to go a *long* way to finding happiness, and to finding the will of God.

The world is searching for simplicity. You may have heard of "tiny houses" – houses or apartments with an incredibly small square-footage, maybe 420 like one I've heard of, but designed in a way to give someone anything they should need – a bedroom, a dining area that fit 10 people – workspace, a kitchen, and even storage. All within 420 square feet. Simplicity. A

designer of such a space says that his happiness level increased immensely when he got rid of all of his “stuff” and space and downsized. And it makes me wonder, in our relational world – is one of the benefits that less stuff means less isolation, and more time spent in the company of others. Maybe.

These ideas of simplicity and that the answer to happiness is *simple* makes sense, and are even achievable. However. The answer may be simple, but it is certainly not *easy*.

NPR has aired at least twice now a program of the TED Radio hour called “The Science of Happiness.” I’d recommend finding it online and listening to it, but to summarize, the conclusions that they come to actually relate back to our song, “Tis the Gift to Be Simple.” They find that happiness and *simplicity* do not happen all at once, just as the answer for the questioners in Isaiah and Micah were not really the “easy” answers that they might have been looking for. Simple, but not easy. The program concludes that happiness takes work that you have to put in over time, with discipline. *Live* out happiness, in other words. *Keep* working. Keep making decisions again and again and again that are just and fair, compassionate and loyal, and humble. Turn, turn, and turn again, until you turn round right.

It’s easy to blame situations for being unhappy. Just like it’s easy to blame other people for the state of the world. It’s easy to blame greedy people. It’s easy to look at corporations and businesses that seem to be making millions and billions of dollars by abusing and exploiting other people and the earth. Easy to blame anyone who has power and seem to only use it to profit themselves.

But our world is more complicated than that. Each one of us has self-interest as our central motivation. But the way to make our lives better, more satisfying, more happy, more *delightful*, is to turn to God to meet that desire for peace, for happiness. Turn to God, and be reminded of others, of the need for justice, for compassion, for humility.

It’s a *walk*, one step at a time, one turn at a time, focusing on simplicity, on turning, and stepping through the difficulty. Through those turns God leads us, and we *delight* in continuing to turn towards God’s love, until we find the place just right.