

Simply Essential

Mark 1:14-20

January 25, 2009

Whitefish UMC

- † Have you ever thought about what you'd take with you if your house were on fire, if a flood threatened, or some other event were to cause you to leave home in a hurry? I know I have.
- † Of course I'd look for the people and creatures I love first—most of us would. So I'd grab Tom and our dog Snappy, who is mostly blind and increasingly deaf. I have a confession to make: I'm not sure I'd try to rescue the five goldfish in the plastic tub next to the sink. I expect Tom would, though.
- † Next I'd grab my Blackberry and my purse, my medicines, and then precious photographs.
- † You have your own priorities, I'm certain. And I think the disciples who Jesus called in today's scripture did too. Mark says they immediately left their nets and followed Jesus. And in the case of James and John, sons of Zebedee, they even left their father in the boat (in the care of the hired men) and took off with Jesus!
- † What then, did they believe so essential that they had to bring it along on their new adventure? I suspect it wasn't material goods, but who really knows? Maybe they brought a special knife or tool, a favorite reminder of their life.
- † One thing is sure, their everyday lives became pared down to what was absolutely essential. Here in these days of economic hardship, we're learning about that, too.

- † Have you noticed that suddenly it's become virtuous to eliminate the excesses of the past and appreciate the basics? Consider the latest Allstate Insurance TV advertisement: an actor reminds us that the company got its start in 1931 during the Great Depression. And then he reassuringly intones: "And through the 12 recessions since, Allstate has noticed that after the fears subside, a funny thing happens: people start enjoying the small things of life. It's back to basics, and the basics are good." (That includes home and auto insurance, presumably.)
- † It may not feel virtuous to the people who have lost their jobs to cut out everything but the basics. As a pastor I have some idea of how hard it is for many families in that situation now. Poverty and struggle are not necessarily ennobling for those who experience it.
- † But something is shifting in our world; do you feel it, too? Tom put it well the other night, and others have echoed similar sentiments: it feels a bit like the New Year has just arrived, and we're already almost at the end of January.
- † It's almost as if we can feel that the words of Jesus at the beginning of today's scripture are meant for us: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near." And those words *are* meant of us.
- † But so are the words that follow: "Repent, and believe in the good news." We're so cynical about that first word: "Repent." We think it's only meant for Bible thumpers and street corner preachers carrying signs: "Repent, the end is near!"
- † But hear the words as if and because they are meant for you: "Repent, and believe the good news." Remember that the word "repent" means

- to turn toward something or someone. And Jesus means that we ought to turn toward God and toward our neighbor.
- † And believing the good news means not only saying we believe it, but living because it is so.
 - † What then can we as disciples, leaving behind everything but the essentials, take with us in this new time, new year, new turning of an era?
 - † According to one of the leaders of our United Methodist Church, it can be boiled down to Three Simple Rules. Retired Bishop Reuben Job, the spiritual leader who wrote the Guide to Prayer that many of us use for daily devotional reading, distilled these essentials from the General Rules adopted by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism.
 - † Remember that Methodism arose during a time of great social upheaval in England—a time when there was more than enough blame to go around for the problems that plagued the people—poverty, addiction, and alienation.
 - † And as Bishop Job observed the world around him in 2007, he decided that the essentials of living as descendants of John Wesley needed to be refined and reintroduced. For the world once again was experiencing poverty, addiction, and alienation, as well as increasing division.
 - † The three Wesleyan rules that Bishop Job offers do seem quite simple:
1. Do no harm. 2. Do good. 3. Stay in love with God. We can remember them, can't we? The greater question is, "Can we live them?"
 - † **Simple Rule # 1: "Do no harm."**

- † Someone referred me to the comics for a great way to illustrate this rule. In “Luann” this spring, Luann and two of her girlfriends (Delta and Bernice) are sitting around talking. Delta says, “All the woes of the world and here we sit, doing nothing. Not helping one bit.”
- † Luann says, “Hey, I’m not out littering or spreading disease or joining a gang.” Bernice says, “Yeah, I’m not fighting a war or polluting or using gas.” Then she and Luann say, “We’re very busy doing our part.” “It’s tiring to be this helpful.” And Delta says in total disgust, “Why do I even like you two?”
- † John Wesley called this “avoiding evil of every kind,” and he was thinking of things like getting drunk, buying or selling slaves, fighting, borrowing money with no intention of paying it back. And we can agree with avoiding those evils for the most part.
- † But what about gossiping, our cynicism, and pessimism. Let’s face it, for many of us it’s hard to be encouraging or supportive because we just know that a person is going to fail at whatever they try. “Yeah, right” is our mantra. And instead we could have praise and encouragement on our lips.
- † Sometimes we do harm by doing nothing. I think of a young man I met this week in Helena, a businessman, county coroner, and funeral director who is a member of the local Republican Central Committee in a town in Colorado. He was in Miles City doing business, eating supper at a local establishment, talking with some guys at the bar.
- † Some of those men decided in conversation that he must be gay, and so they followed him out of the supper club and nearly beat him to death in the parking lot. Yes, the thugs that beat him did harm, but

what about all of those folks who did nothing to stop it? Of course that's an extreme but real example, but you get the point.

- † Doing no harm takes work on our part. It requires us to be intentional about our actions and requires us to think about others and where they are coming from. It requires us not to demonize our opponents, to put ourselves in the shoes of those who disagree with us, to think of them as God's beloved family, too.
- † I don't know about you, but I can't do that on my own. When I think I'm right, I don't want to give up the virtue of my position. Only by thinking of those who disagree with me as God's beloved can I release my need to be right and for that to be acknowledged. Doing no harm is a difficult task, even with God's help.
- † **Simple Rule #2: "Do good."**
- † More wisdom from the comics: the next day Luann and her friends are still talking. Delta says, "I have an idea: Let's start an organization of teens dedicated to making the earth a better place." Bernice and Luann are less than enthusiastic: "Ooo, sounds like a blast." "Yeah, fun." Delta says, "We could do all kinds of good stuff: clean up litter, paint things, plant trees, drive seniors to the mall, volunteer at the hospital and homeless shelter... We could call it The World Improvement Teen Society!" "TWITS?" asks Bernice!? And Luann says, "Wha'd you say about driving to the mall?"
- † It's not enough just to avoid doing bad things. We remember the words of Jesus, "But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." (Luke 6:27-28)

- † Doing good, then, is not limited to those like me or those who like me. Doing good is meant for everyone, even those who don't fit my category of worthy to receive that good. And doing good isn't just a part time job for Christians; our lives are meant to be offered for others, even while we value our self as God values us—not any more or any less than God values others.
- † Remember the young man in Miles City? He told me that as he lay in his hospital bed he wanted to die. He didn't know who to call or what to tell them. He was the organist at a church in his town in Colorado, but he was afraid to tell his employer what had happened.
- † He was friends with the United Methodist pastor in his Colorado town, who had done a lot of the funerals for unchurched people there, so he called him. The pastor's wife answered the phone, and within twenty minutes she had called the UM pastor in Miles City, who appeared with his wife at the young man's bedside. They stayed beside him all night, and along with people from the Miles City church, surrounded him with love and prayer.
- † We are challenged to a bold, counter cultural way of life where a passion for mercy and justice, care for one another and for the earth, will be as passionate a desire for God's people as our desire for self-fulfillment.
- † Listen to these words of Jesus from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*: “Here's a simple rule of thumb for your behavior. Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for them. If you only love the loveable do you expect a pat on the back? Run of the mill sinners do that. If you only help those who help you do you deserve a medal? If you only give for what you hope to get

out of it, do you think that's charity...Live out a God-centered identity the way God lives towards us." (Luke 6: 27ff.)

† **Simple Rule #3: "Stay in love with God."**

† And here's the key to these essentials: live out a God-centered identity the way God lives towards us. Wesley developed what he called "ordinances" for how we are meant to live and grow in relationship with God. He named public worship of God, Holy Communion, private and family prayer, searching the scriptures, fasting from the things that distract you from God, serving others, and being in relationship with other Christians as "means of grace."

† They boil down to things that make any relationship root and grow. Ask yourself, what are the critical elements for keeping a healthy relationship with a spouse or a partner? They comprise the same things: communication, finding time for talking and listening, building trust, doing things together, being vulnerable to one another, respect, being friends.

† These same everyday things done in relationship with God make love grow the way love grows best: from the inside out. What do you do to draw close to the love of God? Where are the places, when are the times when you feel God's presence? Can you make more room for them in your life?

† Here again the words of Jesus: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." The world is shifting, there's a new era beginning.

† What will you take with you on the journey, and what will you leave behind? Make sure what you bring along is simply essential: love of God and neighbor, as well as yourself. Amen.

Sources:

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