

Mark 10:17-30 October 13,2018

Simplicity is an appealing idea. Many of us lead busy lives crammed with too much to do. A simplified schedule sounds good. No schedule at all sounds even better.

But life is becoming more complicated. Forty years ago, the major student behavior problems school teachers faced in the classroom were gum chewing and talking without permission. Today's teachers deal with student who come to the school intoxicated, carry weapons, use or deal drugs, constantly checking their phones, or think about suicide.

There is a story about a shipwrecked sailor who'd spent 3 years alone on an island. Finally, he managed to signal a passing ship, which sent a small boat to the island. Out stepped the ship's first mate. He handed the stranded man a pile of newspapers. The captain suggests, he said, that you read what's going on in the world, and then let us know if you still want to be rescued.

The New York Times once ran a feature story titled "The Simple Life." The editors ran the story because they viewed the quest for a simpler life as a trend. There was a former apparel-industry executive who jumped the fast track to operate a food market in her St. Paul neighborhood. And there are others like Dr. Holmes Morton, who practices medicine among the Amish. His medical colleagues told him he was missing out on wealth and distinction by moving to Amish country, but Morton went anyway.

It isn't easy to simplify, however. We are faced with a bewildering array of choices every day. Author John Naisbitt calls our culture a Baskin Robbins society where everything comes in at least 31 flavors. Naisbitt says that society is changing so rapidly that people haven't enough time to absorb the changes and therefore suffer from a kind of culture shock.

Our lives are made complex by tasks like caring for aging parents while trying not to short-change our own families, or helping our grown children through hard times or squeezing in time to assist at our church, club or social organizations while continuing to work.

The rich young ruler asked Jesus, What must I do to inherit eternal life? If he were our citizen of the 21st century, he might have phrased his question What must I do to be happy and feel fulfilled?

Jesus told him to keep the commandments, give his wealth away and follow Jesus. One way to understand Jesus' advice about the wealth is to view it as an instruction for the young man to simplify his life. Large sums of money and extensive holdings require constant attention and energy. They've got to be constantly monitored. Numerous employees are needed, meaning issues of payroll and labor disputes. There are also matters of production deadline, inventory decisions, board meeting and taxes.

Giving his wealth away might have left the young man impoverished but it also would have simplified his life.

Jesus' aim in advising the rich young man to give his wealth away was not to simplify the man's lifestyle, but to help him discover simplicity of heart. I doubt Jesus would have told ALL wealthy people to divest themselves of every possession. This man needed to do that because his wealth had become too important to him. He couldn't follow Jesus because his possessions anchored him to self-centeredness. His holdings so filled his life that he had no room left for God.

Most of us do not have the rich man's specific problems because we don't have his wealth. That does not mean that the center of our lives is necessarily open to God. Something else may already occupy that spot. The simplicity Jesus calls for is simplicity of heart. The simple life is the life resulting from singleness of purpose.

When God is but one of many competing focuses we cannot have simplicity. Our lives cannot be uncomplicated when there is a multitude of voices within demanding our loyalty. When we invite Christ into our life's center, however, everything else we do is filtered through that basic commitment. Even in complex circumstances where no clear choice is possible, we have an inner assurance that some issues are already decided.

For example, when Christ is in the center, we are not going to purposely follow a path that hurts others, requires dishonesty, or violates our integrity. Those issues are already decided by the simplicity of heart following Jesus brings. When Christ is in the center, his mastering voice brings harmony to the inner clamor that confounds life.

Simplicity does not occur because we give our possessions away and move to the wilderness, appealing as that notion may be a times. It begins when we clear the way for Jesus to enter our hearts, when we move aside that which prevents him from getting into our lives. Giving his wealth away would not by itself bring the rich man God's simplicity, but it would have opened the door for that to happen. Without the hindering love of possessions, he could begin paying attention to the voice of Jesus within.

What stands in the way of our centering on Christ? Each of us will have his or her own answer to that question. When we are willing to set aside our devotion to that which hinders God's presence in our lives, we will be well on our way to the treasured simplicity we seek. Amen.