

True Simplicity

Text: II Corinthians 11:3: - The simplicity that is in Christ

It is Christ's simplicity that defines yours and mine. He possesses it; we long for it. Chesterton tells us that while we rush to complexity, we yearn for simplicity. Why do we yearn for it? Because, for one thing, complexity threatens to overwhelm us. There is just too much going on; we can't cope with it. And so much that threatens the peace of our days and the tranquility of our nights seems superficial. We wish to be rid of it and long for a life that is deeper, more real and more satisfying. We find ourselves nostalgic for a simpler age, wishing that we had been born in an earlier, less bewildering time. Every age seems to us to have been more serene than our own. Or we long for a simpler religion, for the old morality that seemed to be less ambiguous and bewildering than the new.

Events seem somehow beyond our control. Helpless to deal with the great things, we manage the little things. We make gestures towards simplicity. Last week, for example, I tidied my desk and felt better for doing so. Now I have three piles of paper instead of four. Or we learn a new technique to help us organize our days. Not long ago, one of my colleagues announced that one should always do one of three things with every bit of correspondence: answer it at once, or file it, or throw it out. I have been doing that since he talked to me. I am now master of my fate and captain of my soul. What a breakthrough!

Some go even farther. I have some wealthy friends who had houses everywhere and cars everywhere and boats everywhere until they grew weary of it all and sold the lot. Well, almost. Now they have one house and two cars. They "simplified" their life.

But we know that's not it. That's a gesture, a preliminary skirmish, the easy part. These pitiful actions are but an expression of our bewilderment and helplessness; they still leave us at the edges when we know we have to travel to the center. Simplicity is more than tidying up, and no re-arrangement yields serenity. We make these gestures because we don't know what else to do. And because we don't we begin to make mistakes. Instead of finding simplicity, we become simplistic. We seek clarity by reduction. We rob things of their mystery and imagine we have solved them. Or we simplify indiscriminately. We all know people who thought to simplify their life by giving something up only to discover that they had given up the wrong thing, for they did not know the things that belonged to their peace. We don't know what to surrender, and, lacking a wise discrimination, may throw out the good with the bad. I know one man who, not knowing what to give up to simplify his life, gave up everything only to find himself staring at empty days he must somehow usefully fill.

Other friends have sought to simplify their lives by finding something new. The old diversions no longer amused, the old pursuits no longer satisfied, but a new hobby might and a new interest can always be contrived. They ended up with one more ball to keep in the air as they juggled their way through their days.

Wise ones then begin to realize that true simplicity is not a matter of arrangement, merely, or a technique that any good business school might teach; it is not giving up this or taking up that. It is a spiritual quality. It is not to be found by going after it by

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itself, for it is one among a cluster of qualities each of which makes the others possible, and all of which run deep enough to touch the nerve of our being. Simplicity is a matter of character. It has to do with values—who we are and why we were made. We don't simplify our lives by tidying our desk or giving up tennis, but by discovering some saving priority to which we can give our whole heart. If it is to be found it will be found within us, not outside us.

One of my best friends built houses for years and then, weary of that, began to build boats. He has a theory about how and what people build, born of his knowledge of himself and his experience of others. "People build what they are," he tells me. I thought of that when I looked at some Shaker furniture the other day. It was utterly simple and beautiful in its simplicity. Shaker furniture is the expression of Shaker character.

Simplicity, then, is not so much a matter of technique as it is an expression of our inner life and our spiritual depth. Dag Hammarskjöld, who needed no instruction from anyone about the complexity of our world, believed that simplicity might be his as a work of grace in his soul. And so he prayed, "If only I could grow; firmer simpler, calmer, warmer." We remember our text, "the simplicity that is in Christ," and learn from it that it is a divine vocation, not a method that might be learned at a management seminar. So if I exhort you, as I instruct myself, to a greater simplicity, what are the qualities it requires of us?

I. True simplicity is born of integrity.

Integrity means being all-of-a-piece, where impulse of the heart, the thought of the mind, word of the mouth and action of the hand are all one simple, single expression of the whole person. That is integrity. But notice that the word the King James Version translates "simplicity," the New English Bible translates "single-heartedness," or, if you like, "singlemindedness." To have integrity means there is no contradiction in us, no "torn to piecesness" as William James described our divided self.

If we had that kind of integrity wouldn't our life be simpler? If our view were single, if we saw clearly and did what we perceived, wouldn't that simplify our life with a deep, enduring quality? Now we begin to get a hint of something important. The opposite of simplicity is not complexity. The opposite of simplicity is insincerity, dissimulation, contradiction. If you like, lies!

Have you noticed how simple and natural the truth is? When you speak it, you don't have to remember what you said. You have just to tell it. It comes naturally, again and again. But if truth is natural, lies are unnatural. For one thing, you have to remember them. Don't be a liar if you don't have a good memory, for you're going to need it. "O what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive!" One falsehood falsifies the whole world. It means we have to stop and think and work things out before we dare say anything. Having lied, the truth might give us away. Suddenly our life is infinitely more complicated than it was.

But it is worse even than that, for we can't keep the lie outside us. It invades our life and becomes part of our awareness of ourselves and the double look we have to give everything. Our openness, directness and simplicity are lost. We become false people

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living in a world we have made false, and that becomes very complicated indeed. No wonder it exhausts us!

There was a crooked man who walked a crooked mile.
He found a crooked sixpence upon a crooked style.
He bought a crooked cat which caught a crooked mouse,
And they all lived together in a little crooked house.

Why was everything crooked? Because the man was crooked. He was a crook. If we wish to simplify our life, the place to begin is with our own integrity.

What a difference that can make to our relationships! George MacDonald, speaking of one of the deepest relationships of life, asks, "What is our first duty to each other?" And his answer is, "To be what we appear." Simple, isn't it? And profound! If we were to allow our integrity to pervade our relationships, if we were to people what we appear, what a welcome relief it would bring from our carefully projected image, our pretense, our hypocrisy. Not only would our life be saved from dissimulation, it would gain enormously in style. Says George Orwell, speaking of literature, "Nothing helps a good style like sincerity." If you know what it is you want to say, and wish to be understood when you say it, your words will be short, clear, precise and readily received. They will have what William Blake, poet and engraver, called "the hard line of rectitude" about them. But if you're not sure what you want to say, or if, being sure, you want to deceive rather than reveal, your words will multiply and swell like balloons. They will confuse and not clarify; they will be long and ambiguous and will carry ten meanings, not one.

Do you ever wonder why, when our politicians make speeches, we have to have a panel of experts to tell us what they meant? Don't you think we would understand what they meant if they wanted us to? Do you know why Jesus was divine? At least part of the answer is that God was able to speak through Him a clear, revealing word. There was no division in Him. He was like the robe that He wore, woven in one piece, without seam. He had what the New Testament calls "purity of heart." There was no contradiction in Him. What He felt, He thought; and what He thought, He said; and what He said, He did. When you saw Him you saw all of Him. When you heard Him you had the truth of Him. And when He looked at you He was fully present to you. And through this wholeness God's word came clearly.

II. True simplicity is kin to humility.

François Fenelon, the French Archbishop who made profound things so simple so often, said, "Simplicity is the uprightness of the soul that is not absorbed with itself. It is the quality that belongs to those who have made a perfect renunciation of themselves."

When I read that definition of simplicity, it reminded me immediately of Dag Hammarskjöld's definition of humility. He said, "Humility is to perceive reality not in relation to ourselves, but in its sacred independence. It is to see it from that point of rest in ourselves." Notice that they are both saying the same thing. One is talking about simplicity, the other about humility, and they're both saying that you can't have one without the other. Both simplicity and humility begin in that point of rest in ourselves from which we perceive reality not in relation to ourselves, and we can't have either

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quality so long as we put ourselves at the center and try to make everything revolve around us.

Now, we know that. Part of the complexity of our life is that we want to do things for other people. Moved by a generous impulse, we attempt to do so but instead end up serving ourselves. We want to work for their good, but our own interests get in the way. There are times when we see clearly that the whole purpose of our life, the satisfaction of all our yearning, is to find someone to whom we can give ourselves completely, with nothing held back, so that we can say to them in all honesty, "You have all of me." It is not simply that we long for integrity, for wholeness, but that, having found it, we long to give ourselves away, unspoiled by the intrusion of our own desires, interests and appetites.

What pure pleasure it would be to know a beautiful woman and to enjoy her without wanting to possess her! Or to say with Edna St. Vincent Millay:

I will be the gladdest thing
Under the sun!
I will touch a hundred flowers
And not pick one.

That is to perceive things in their sacred independence. It is to have Hammarskjold's humility. And it is to have Fenelon's simplicity, the uprightness of a soul that is not absorbed in itself, the grace that can see and admire without needing to possess.

Have you ever thought what a genuine humility would do for our painful self-consciousness? You know how awkward we feel when we walk into a room thinking all the time that everyone is looking at us and wondering all the time what they're thinking of us. We wonder what we should say or do to end our unease. Should we try to impress them or just act naturally? But we don't know what "naturally" means. It doesn't help much even to tell ourselves that we're probably wrong in our assumption that we are the center of interest and attention. People are usually giving us much less attention than we think they are, being far more interested in themselves than they are in us. But this does not help our awkwardness. How wonderful it would be to walk into a room and be genuinely more interested in the people who are there than in the impression we were making on them! What a release to be delivered in this way from our self-consciousness! It would bring enormous freedom and lightness of spirit if we could enjoy people without getting in our own way. And it would simplify our life, for all our energy, interest and attention would flow in one direction.

Or think how a genuine humility would end our competitiveness. Wouldn't it be a happy thing to be able to say of someone, "he is very good" without wondering if he is as good as we are, or whether he is so good as to threaten us? Wouldn't it elevate us if we could be glad that another is so gifted without wondering if his gifts are greater than our own? What serenity and peace such a humility would bring, and how it would simplify our life to be rid of the competitiveness that adds tension to our days. Says St. Thomas à Kempis, "The humble in spirit dwell in a multitude of peace." The humble in spirit, not the inordinately competitive in spirit. Or think how a humility of this sort would release us from the strain of sustaining our image. To conceal the emptiness

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within, we hide behind an academic hood, or a clerical collar, or a title, or position, pretending to know more or to be better than we are. How important that we should convince others of our stature, for they in turn will help us to believe it. But the strain of it! The energy it takes! And we never do succeed in overcoming our sense of emptiness and falseness.

We are often told nowadays that we lack a sense of sin. I don't know if that's true. But let me ask whether or not you grow weary and dissatisfied with the sense of your own phoniness? What an unending effort it takes to keep up appearances and put on a front! And how empty we feel when, as Kierkegaard tells us, the midnight hour strikes when all masks come off. Who are we then, and how do we think of ourselves? And the sad thing is that we spend all that energy preserving an image when we could be delivered from our inordinate self-concern and begin to enjoy the world in its sacred independence.

In 1956 I read a sentence I have never forgotten. Written by Walter Kaufman, it contains a philosophy of life in its few words: "Only the great philosophers laugh." They laugh because they are great. They are not threatened, as little philosophers are, when their system of thought is attacked. They are secure in their ability to refine it, or to think up another one. They manage to see their search for truth and meaning as a thing in itself, not as something that has value only because it is theirs. And so they have a lightsome spirit. Being great, they laugh. They are at peace with themselves. They are not fretful about their own place or importance. Did you ever think that simplicity arises from a humility of this sort; from being able to perceive reality not in relation to ourselves? When we are able to do so, we see and enjoy things in their sacred independence. We are at peace with ourselves.

III. Simplicity is the fruit of sanctity.

Austin Farrer, to whom I owe as much as I owe any man, said once that "sanctity is just utter simplicity before the Divine will." Does that sound difficult? It is made easy for us if we see it in the life of Christ. It means that Jesus moved from task to task saying, "This is what God my Father wants me to do now." He came, He tells us, not to do His own will but the will of His Father who sent Him. The simplicity in Christ consisted in this, that He discovered God's will for His life, and did it. His was the simplicity of loving obedience.

Such goodness would simplify our life enormously. For one thing, it would give us our sense of priority. What a comfort to know that in any moment we are doing what we ought to be doing. Always there are a dozen conflicting claims on our time and attention and twenty useful things that we might do. But normally there is only one thing that we must do. To discover what it is, and to do it, is the secret not only of sanctity but simplicity.

Often we complicate our lives because, while we want to put first things first, we don't know which things are first things. So we blunder from task to task with no saving priority to guide us. We have impetus but no direction and end up by doing a bit of this

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and a bit of that. We are like Stephen Leacock's celebrated Lord Ronald who "flung himself from the room, flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions."

This is of great practical importance to me, for it would be impossible to be minister of this great church without having a clear sense of priorities. My priorities have been chosen and will be adhered to. I want to love you as much as I can and preach to you as well as I can. Those two things have first claim on my time and attention. Of the many things I might do, perhaps even of the many things I ought to do, these will be done first.

The choosing of one's priorities brings a sense of peace. An awareness of what one is called to do makes the big decision for us, and making the big decision makes many of the little ones. If I am a Christian, for example, I don't have to discover a new set of values every day. Being a Christian is enough to decide many questions of behavior and morality. What is left for me is not to discover new answers but to be obedient and faithful to the truth I already know. Someone once asked Willie Mays the secret of his success as a baseball player. He replied, "When they throw it, I hit it, and when they hit it, I catch it." Massively simple, but those fundamentals contain all the subtleties of the greatest game in the world. The fundamentals are clear, the refinement is inexhaustible.

I see this clearly in the life and work of Mother Teresa. She moved from task to task with an enormous serenity while the rest of us, with far fewer demands upon our time and thought, live our lives of quiet desperation. And she did so, not because she was very clever, but because she was good. She knew what Jesus wanted her to do for love of Him, and she did it. And she did it with grace and humor. Because it was for Him, she did it as beautifully as she could. She did something beautiful for God.

What does God want you to do? To begin with, He wants you to pray. And it pleases Him when you do your work well and care for those entrusted to your love. He longs for truth in your inward parts, and that you should praise what is worthy of honor. Start there, and see not only what simplicity, but what richness, your life will have.

'Tis the gift to be simple
'Tis the gift to be free
'Tis the gift to come down where you ought to be.
And when we find ourselves in the place just right
'Twill be the valley of love and delight.

When true simplicity is gained,
To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed.
To turn, turn, will be our delight
'Till by turning, turning, we come round right.

A Shaker Poem. c 1840