

It Is Well With My Soul (Part 9 of 9 in *Simple Summer* series)

Psalm 148

September 4, 2011 – Browns Point UMC

Rev. Elizabeth Ingram Schindler

When I first started planning this simplicity series for the summer, I was in Indianapolis, walking around the city with another young clergywoman during a break in a conference we were attending. We had discussed all kinds of things over a pretty long walk, and at some point I floated the idea of 9 weeks of sermons on simplicity. I explained the need for the topic in the over-busy culture of our congregation, and that I hoped some parts of worship would be simpler. I even had a picture in my head of Adirondack chairs on the front porch with glasses of lemonade, though that never came to fruition. My friend, who, being both kind and honest, is the best kind of friend, turned to me as we waited to cross a busy street downtown and said, "Simplify worship and make it more summery by all means, but please, do not preach for 9 straight weeks on simplicity."

And at that point, I wasn't sure it would go well, either. But to tell you the truth, I feel like we could do it all again and the topics would not get redundant or tired. There are so many things we can still do to simplify our lives, to make room for Christ and others where busy-ness currently fills the space, to empty our hands so that we can receive the gifts of grace, to quiet the cacophony of our minds so we can hear the voice of God calling.

And so I hope you remember some of what we've discussed this summer, whether you've already started practicing simplicity and are reaping the benefits, or are still hoping to change your life for the better by ridding yourself of the things you don't need and focusing on God's vision. Remember that **more is not necessarily better**, that just because you *can* have more, do more, and be more, doesn't mean you should. God created us for a life in which we are not possessed by the need to achieve and acquire, not obsessed with our goods and our reputations, and not distracted by all the things we cram into each day, so that we are able to give ourselves over to God's will and see the journey God has laid out for us. What's more, God created us in God's own image and asks us daily to try to live out that image more and more, which includes not cramming more things into our lives but taking **at least one day out of seven to rest**. At least one day out of seven, we should stop working and simply enjoy the gifts of grace: the people in our lives, the beauty of creation, the breath in our lungs and the time to give thanks. For at least one day out of seven, we should stop working, stop trying to achieve and acquire more and more, take time to rest and re-set for the week ahead. We were created for this kind of rest.

Remember that productivity and speed are not Christian virtues, and we are all called to **slow down**. Hurried people cannot love, because love takes time. Hurried people cannot worship, because worship often means waiting in stillness for the Spirit to move. Hurried people cannot be disciples, because they are not willing to follow one who walked and rested and took time to be in ministry with those around him. Do whatever you need to do to slow down. Practice patience. Try solitude. Remember that slowing down might lessen your productivity, but it will almost certainly increase your righteousness.

Remember that Christians practicing simplicity eat in a certain way: they do not let the powers of the world or even the messages of their own bodies enslave them, but they practice the freedom that God desires for us by **fasting**, intentionally emptying themselves so that they

become hungry for what really matters. And when simple Christians break bread together, they do so on their knees, repenting for the ways our **food choices** have hurt ourselves, others, and the earth, and vowing to live in dependence to God for all things rather than acting as if we are masters of our own fates, captains of our own souls.

Remember that God calls us to be honest about our issues with **wealth and affluence**, and be willing to confront the power money has over you. Consider Christ's call to the rich young ruler: go, sell all you have, give the money to the poor, *then* come follow me. Empty your hands of unneeded stuff so you will be free to receive the gifts of grace like a child. Make space in your life for Christ to enter. Untie yourself from your possessions so that when Christ calls you to follow, you can go. Rely more on Christ than you do your own affluence.

Remember that God calls us to be picky about what enters our **minds**, and warns us not to be conformed to the patterns of this world. Set an intentional rhythm for your life, thinking about what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable, so that the peace of God will be with you. And remember that God does not call us to be well-rounded, but to **use our unique gifts** for the good of the body of Christ. Figure out what your gifts are, what gives you life, and then use those gifts to serve the church and the world by doing one thing well.

If we do these things, if we simplify our lives, then I believe God's presence will become even more palpable in our midst, God's vision for us as individuals and a congregation will become more clear, and the worries and anxieties of the world will be greatly lifted from our shoulders as we deepen our relationships with God and others. If we engage in these practices of simplicity, the noise of our lives will begin to quiet down so that we can, with the Celtic monks, listen for the heartbeat of God. John Philip Newell, who writes about Celtic Christianity, explains that these monks don't just listen *to* the heartbeat of God, as if it's obvious, but they listen *for* it, as it is often concealed in all that is around us.¹

And that is the goal for us, too, that we might make space and time to listen, that we might hear not only God's shouts or God's whispers, but God's very heartbeat in all that is around us. And then, that we might respond with the Psalmist: with natural, uncoerced, almost spontaneous praise. The Psalm we heard this morning is just that: it is repeated Hallelujahs, both commands for us to praise and praise in and of itself. When we praise so naturally, without having to think about doing it, without having to work at praising God, we are truly the people, the creatures, that God intended us to be, just as the mountains and the hills and the stars and the clouds and the birds are.

There is a verse of the great hymn, *It Is Well With My Soul*, that is not printed in our hymnal. It says:

*For me, be it Christ, be it Christ hence to live:
If Jordan above me shall roll,
No pang shall be mine, for in death as in life
Thou wilt whisper Thy peace to my soul.*

When we simplify our lives, we can be the people God created us to be, in God's image, with space for Christ in our lives, trust in God's grace, the freedom to attend to relationships, and the capacity to care for others and the earth. **We can receive God's whisper of peace in our**

¹ As cited by Martin G. Townsend in *Pastoral Perspective* on Psalm 148. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year A, Volume 1, p. 156.

very souls. We can hear the heartbeat of God and respond, as we were intended to, with all creation, in praise, no matter what else is happening around us. Let us remember these practices, that we might sing unending praise, able strongly to proclaim, “It is well, it is well with my soul.”