

### ***“Simplicity, Generosity and Joy”***

So let me tell you why I'm wearing the suit today. First, don't get used to it. But this suit, it is the only suit I own. I bought it about 12 years ago, not long after coming here to Joplin. I heard somewhere that every pastor needs a good black suit. So when I got to Joplin I went to Famous-Barr and I bought one. It wasn't an expensive one, but I wanted one that would last, that wouldn't go out of style too quickly.

When we were a more formal church, this is the suit I wore on Easter, this is the suit I wore on Christmas Eve, this is the suit that I have worn for almost every funeral I've done—some for people that I knew and loved very deeply. It's the suit I've worn for almost every wedding I've performed.

This old suit is probably a little bit out of style, but I tell you, it and I share a lot of memories together. It's the only suit I own. And there've been a few times when I look at it think, “That things 7 years old, 10 years old 12 years old. Maybe I need to get a new black suit.” But there's nothing wrong with this one. And the more I think about the things we've shared, this suit and me, the more I appreciate it.

In fact, if this thing is still in decent shape, and I can fit it in, when I die, I think I want to be buried in it.

All this is a way of getting at how so often we think we have to have new, and we think we have to have something updated, but sometimes we can wear things that are not in style and know that there's nothing wrong with that. To me, this suit represents simplicity. And that's what I want to talk about today—simplicity and contentment.

Let's start by looking at these words of Jesus from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus said, **“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15, TNIV)**. So, do you believe that? Jesus, the Master, tells you that your life does not consist in the abundance of your possessions. Actually, I'd like for you to claim it as a personal statement. **My life does not consist in the abundance of my possessions.**

I believe that. I believe it because Jesus said it. I believe it because I feel it. My life can't consist in the abundance of my stuff. But I have this problem: everywhere I go, the world is telling me just the opposite. It tells me, “If you had a little bit more, you'd be happier. If you had this thing that you don't have right now, you'd find satisfaction. You'd be happy, or happier, than you are right now.” So while Jesus is telling me one thing, the whole culture is telling me another. There's this struggle inside that fuels a discontent in my heart.

Let's talk about discontent for a minute. Because not all discontent is bad. God actually wired our hearts so that they would be discontent with some things. The problem is that we get discontent in the wrong ways. James McIntosh put it this way, **“It is right to be contented with what we have, but never with what we are.”** We're not supposed to be content with who we are. We're supposed to be constantly striving to be more than we are today. We're meant to long for more of God than we have today. We're meant to desire a better prayer life tomorrow than we have today. To pursue justice more next year than last year. To long for more righteousness and holiness. To love other people more tomorrow than we did yesterday. To desire to be more grace-filled and have more character and grow in wisdom and stature. We're supposed to be discontent in those things.

The problem is that we're content with our level of mercy, we're content with our love for others, we're content with our relationship with God, with our prayer lives, with how we go beyond ourselves to help others. We're content with all that, and we should not be.

And the things we should be contented with, we're not. Our home that was a dream home when we bought, after a few months we start thinking that the layout just isn't quite right, the carpet isn't high enough quality, we immediately start being discontent. Our car, the one we couldn't wait to get, before the new car smell went away, we're thinking about the next new car. It spreads to our jobs we start to think that the grass is greener somewhere else. It happens to some people in the church. They become discontented with the church.

We did it when we were kids. Do you remember saying, “I wish Mike's mom and dad were my parents. If I had Mike's parents I'd be so happy! I wouldn't have all these problems, I'd get good grades if I had his parents, and I probably wouldn't even have pimples.” And you know what Mike was saying? Mike was saying,

“I wish I had Aaron’s parents! If I had Aaron’s parents I’d be really happy. They’re so nice and let you do so many things.”

Parents do the same thing to their kids though! “How come your friends are so respectful of us and their parents and you’re not? I want to trade you off for them!” The problem is if they stayed with you they’d become monsters in your house too!

And it’s how it works in our marriages. We’re dating and get married and all we can see are all the good and wonderful things in our spouse. But after the honeymoon we stop seeing those good things and all we see are the things that frustrate us and drive us crazy. And after awhile we bump into somebody else, that amazing woman, “If only we had met earlier...If I was married to someone as great as you. I’d be really happy.” So we begin to compare our mate who we know very well, to someone who is really an illusion that we don’t know.

See what our discontent does? It infects the very things that are good in our life, with an illusion that isn’t even real. We have so many good things in our lives, but we become infected with an unhealthy discontent. It’s like we’re hamsters on a wheel that’s going nowhere. That’s kind of like us. We don’t really know where we’re going but everybody else seems to be heading there so we’d better go to and go faster and faster to get there! Until finally something breaks—us, or the system. The discontent keeps us going nowhere fast.

As we think about contentment, let’s look at the words of the Apostle Paul. When he writes these words, Paul is sitting in prison cell in the city of Rome—the cell was essentially a hole in the ground—dank and dark. He’s waiting to hear if he will be executed. He dictated this letter to someone who was on the other side of a grate in the ceiling of his prison cell. With that in mind he writes, **“I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want” (Philippians 4:11-12, NIV).** That’s what we want to learn too, so that whatever our circumstances we find that sense of contentment too.

The write of the book of Hebrews says, **“Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid’” (Hebrews 13:5-6, NIV).** You can be content because you know he’s by your side no matter what you’re walking through.

Until we get this part right, we’ll always struggle with finding real satisfaction, because if we don’t find it in God, then we’ll always be looking for that next thing, thinking it will do the trick and it won’t.

And that leads us to simplicity. Simplicity is huge if we’re going to be content. Richard Foster says that **The trait of simplicity begins as an inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle.** Simplicity starts as an inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle. This is something I talked about a couple of years ago, but it’s all the more relevant today. Simplicity begins with the inner reality that God is with us, that in him we live and move and have our being, that if God is for us, who can stand against us? But how do we live it out.

First **“Traits of inner simplicity: We see everything we have as a gift from God.”** Yes, we work, but we know that it’s not our work that gives us what we have. Think about the food in your refrigerator at home. You can look at it and say, “I worked at my job to earn an income. I used that money to buy this food, therefore I provided this food.” That’s a short view. Inward simplicity begins with a long view. Who provided the rain, the climate, the nutrients, the environment to make that food even possible? Inward simplicity receives what we have as a gift from God.

Inner simplicity also means **We realize that it’s God’s business to care of what we have.** It’s about trust. God is able to protect what we possess. We can trust him to take care of our stuff. Now, does that mean that we don’t lock our doors or take the keys out of the car? No! But it does mean we recognize that it isn’t the lock on the door that protects the house. Thinking our precautions protect us only makes us worry all the more. The same thing is true of our reputations and our jobs. Inner simplicity means we have the freedom to trust God for caring for these things. And if we lose those things we trust God to take care of us anyway.

Inner simplicity also means that **We make our stuff available to others.** Richard Foster writes, “If our goods are not available to the community when it is clearly right and good, then they are stolen goods.” We have a hard time sharing what we have because we’re afraid of what tomorrow might bring. But if we really believe that God is who Jesus said he is, then we don’t need to be afraid. Inner simplicity means we make our stuff available to others.

These three things, seeing everything as a gift from God, knowing that it’s God’s job to care for what we have, and making our stuff available to others, these are the inner part of simplicity. But it can’t stop there. This is where the rubber hits the road. What is going on inwardly needs to be lived outwardly.

Let me give a few suggestions for the outward expression of simplicity. But first I’ve got to warn you. This stuff is counter-cultural. This stuff is radical. But this stuff leads to real, lasting, freedom and a deeper connection to God and others. Don’t tune this stuff out, we all need to hear this, especially as we get ready for the holidays.

The first outward expression of simplicity “**Outward expressions of simplicity: Buy things for their usefulness rather than their status.**” Buy things for their usefulness rather than their status. Buy a car for its utility not for its status. Ride a bike when you can. When you’re renting an apartment, or buying a house or building a house to live in think about its livability, not how it will impress people. Don’t have more living space than is reasonable.

And what about clothes? Most of us have do not need more clothes! We buy more to keep up with fashion. What if we just bought what we need? What if we wore our clothes until they were worn out?

What if we stopped trying to impress people with our clothes and let them be impressed with our lives? That’s one reason why we’re a casual church, so you don’t have to fuss, to primp, to get gussied up. Come as you are. We can be reverent and casual at the same time. That’s what we strive for, casual and reverent.

All this means that we don’t give in to the pressure to have the newest and latest. We’re content with a things usefulness, not it’s newness.

Here’s another outward expression of simplicity, **Reject anything that is producing an addiction.** This means learning to know the difference between real needs, like cheerful surroundings, and an addiction. Eliminate, or cut down on the use of non-nutritional drinks like coffee, tea, soft-drinks, and alcohol. Chocolate has become a perceived addiction for lots of us. So have our TVs, our iPods, our cell phones, our computers, our magazines, and newspapers. Invite God’s healing power in, invite friends in to help and eliminate anything that produces an addiction.

Another outward expression of simplicity is to **Develop a habit of giving things away.** The more attached you are to something, the more you should consider giving it away. What if this Christmas, instead of buying things, or even making things, what if you and I gave away things that meant a lot to us? This facet of simplicity is about holding things lightly. We hold them lightly so that we can give them away if the time is right. We hold things lightly so that if they’re taken from us, we weren’t really attached anyway.

And it goes without saying that we need to de-accumulate, give away, the stuff that we don’t use at all! Most of the stuff that we have that we don’t really need just clutters up our homes, our offices, our lives. This stuff just complicates life. All that stuff has to be sorted, dusted, resorted, stored. Think of the time we’d save by just giving it away.

We moved into a new parsonage this Summer and it was a great way to de-accumulate! We got rid of about 10 car loads of stuff. What if, every couple of years, we all pretended like we’re moving, and got rid of all the stuff that we would not want to have to move? Most of us could get rid of half of our stuff without any serious sacrifice; and the impact would be less clutter, more time, more money available to do things of significance.

Here’s another outward expression of simplicity, **Learn to enjoy things without owning them.** Owning things is an obsession in our culture. If we own it, we feel like we can control it; and if we control it, we

feel like it will give us more pleasure. This is an illusion! Lots of things in life can be enjoyed without us owning them. Here's a radical concept: share things. Enjoy the beach without feeling like you have to buy a piece of it.

How about this as a way to experience simplicity, **Develop a deeper appreciation for creation.** Get outside, get close to the earth. Have you played in the leaves yet this year? Oh we have! There is something spiritual about piling up leaves, running through them, rolling in them, stuffing them down your daughter's pants.

We have some amazing trails around Joplin now, use them. Soak up the outdoors. Walk whenever you can. Listen to nature. Enjoy the textures of the grass and leaves. Smell the flowers. Simplicity means to rediscover the simply beauty and awesome magnificence of this earth.

The bottom line in simplicity is to avoid anything that distracts you from seeking first the kingdom of God. It's so easy to get on the hamster wheel and go round and round thinking we're going somewhere, but just getting tired and go nowhere. Simplicity, inner and outer, helps us to connect more deeply to God and to others. Inner simplicity is making God the center, outward simplicity takes many forms and brings many freedoms. The way to contentment, and sanity, is God's way, it is the way of simplicity.

What would it look like to live life with simplicity? I think it would be a life with a greater margin of time, a life of deeper friendships, of more caring families, a life of greater compassion, of more rest, a life with a greater amount of joy. A life of simplicity would be a life with greater financial margin and ability to give and share. A life of simplicity would be a life of true appreciation of the good things we have available us. It would be a life of amazing gratitude. It would be a life of a growing closeness to God.

One last word about contentment. A key component is gratitude. Paul put it this way, **“Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus” (1Thessalonians 5:18, NIV).** An attitude of gratitude shouldn't just be a day in November for followers of Jesus, it should be a daily choice. A choice to be thankful even in the midst of the hard stuff, the difficult stuff, the stuff you'd normally complain about, you choose to see what's good. You choose to give thanks for the big things in life and the little things. Gratitude changes us, and it changes others, it changes the world.

Today is commitment Sunday, the day when our members and those of you consider this your church family fill out your commitment card and drop it in the basket.

There are two ways of looking at your commitment card when you turn it in. You can look at it and say, “I'm a church member, it's my obligation, and hopefully it will help pay the bills for next year.” That's one way of looking at it. Here's how I look at it. Last night as Janet and I filled out our card and we figured out what our tithe was going to be, it's our way to say, “Thank you God for everything you've done for us. Thank you for the blessing we anticipate next year. Thank you for being our God. Thank you for the love that you've shown for us. We could never repay you for all this. This is just a small reflection of the love we have for you, and of how grateful we are.” And when we put this in the basket it's an act of worship and an act of thanksgiving.

God's way works. It's the way of simplicity, generosity and joy. My prayer for you as your pastor is that you live into these things. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

During this last song, bring your commitment cards up and put them in this basket. Let's give thanks.

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