

*'Tis a Gift to be Simple:
"Okay, Our Bad: It's Not so Simple!"*

Isaiah 55:6-12

⁶ Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;

*⁷ let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

*⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.*

*⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

*¹⁰ For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,*

*¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

*¹² For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.*

Many years ago, there was a college football coach who was having a tough time on a Saturday afternoon. This is not a story about Rich Rodriguez and the Michigan football team this year. This team was playing up against their long time arch-rival, and they were playing for the league championship. But injuries were taking their toll. In the first half, his first string quarterback got hurt. In the second half, his second string quarterback had to be carried off the field. Then in the last quarter his third string quarterback was knocked out.

There were two minutes left in the game, and score was tied 14 to 14 when the coach called for McTavish. McTavish was a freshman, the fourth string quarterback, and the team's punter. When McTavish ran up to the coach to be put in the game, this conversation took place.

Coach: McTavish, are you listening to me? Yes, sir!

Coach: Can you follow my instructions? Yes, Sir!

Coach: Can you do exactly what I tell you to do? Yes, sir!

“OK, listen closely. There are two minutes left in the game, and the score is tied, 14 to 14. We have the ball on our own ten yard line. There’s no way we can win, so we’re going run as much time off the clock as we can and settle for a tie. Now here’s what I want you to do. Get in there and follow my plan exactly or you’ll never plan for this team again. You hear me? We don’t have any time-outs so I can’t give you any more plays. Don’t think – just do as I say.”

“On the first play, run a quarterback sneak, on the second play run a quarterback sneak, on the third play run a quarterback sneak, and then on the fourth play, you drop back and punt the ball out of the stadium. Kick it as far as you can!”

With those instructions, McTavish took the field. On the first play, he ran the quarterback sneak and believe it or not, the line opened up. And he ran straight up the field for a 30 yard gain.

On the second play, the same thing happened. He ran the quarterback sneak, and again, amazingly, gained 30 yards. On the third play, McTavish ran the quarterback sneak again. Once more, there was a big hole in the center of the line. He dashed through it and then cut to the outside, and he went 29 yards. He was knocked out of bounds just inches short of the goal-line, inches short of the winning touchdown.

Then on the fourth play, McTavish dropped back and punted the ball out of the stadium. The gun sounded and the game ended. The crowd could not believe what they had just seen. The coach threw his hat down in disgust, stomped it, and then he ran onto the field in search of McTavish.

“McTavish,” the coach shouted, “What in the world were you doing?” “Just what you told me to do,” the young quarterback answered. “No!” said the coach, “What were you thinking?” McTavish answered, “I was thinking that we have got to have the dumbest coach in America!”

Was McTavish’s problem really a dumb coach? His problem was that he was so paralyzed by fear of doing something wrong that he could not adapt when something new was called for. McTavish represents the “Don’t think, Just do as I say” approach to Christianity. Because sometimes simple, pre-set instructions cannot apply to the complexities of our lives.

That’s why this sermon is called “Our Bad! It’s not so Simple!” At times life is very complex and our best efforts to achieve simplicity just don’t work. Take the master of simplicity himself, Henry David Thoreau. After hammering together his ten-by-fifteen-foot cottage on Walden Pond, Thoreau declined the offer of a doormat because of the time it would cost him to shake it out. For a while he kept three limestone rocks on his desk. But he pitched them out the window in disgust when he found they required daily dusting. In 1857, Thoreau and a companion hired an Indian guide for a twelve-day canoe trip into the Maine woods. Thoreau,

this man who preached “Simplify, simplify” assembled 166 pounds of baggage, enough to nearly swamp the canoe when they launched it.

Yes, he wasn’t much of a carpenter; the site of his house was littered with bent nails. Yes, he lived there for only two years. Yes, his mother and sister did his laundry all the while. But forgive him. No one said it was going to be easy, but Thoreau presented an enduring vision of how we could live – if only things weren’t so complicated.

And as much as we want to simplify our lives, reality is complicated. The great thinker Alfred North Whitehead said it as well as anyone: “Seek simplicity, then distrust it.” When things appear simple to you, take a good look. You’ll find that there’s a lot more there. Now I wish I could make what I’m about to say very simple – but it’s not. It’s complicated. And here it is: Life is so complex that often we need to go “back to the basics” and simplify our intentions and actions. But once we have narrowed things down, the simplicity begins to frustrate us when we try to apply it to all situations. And so we try to find ways to apply the simple to the complex again. Simplicity leads to complexity and back to simplicity again. It’s a process.

We see this time and again, not only in our lives, but also in the scriptures. For example, I think we would all agree that the Ten Commandments are central to the Hebrew scriptures and to our understanding of how we are to order our lives together. But very early on Jewish authorities realized that the Commandments just didn’t fit all of the situations they encountered in life. Life was proving so complex – even 2,500-plus years ago – that it wasn’t clear how the Commandments really applied. They realized that these laws had been written in circumstances of the past, and that they needed adaptation if they were to fit the circumstances of contemporary life. So in addition to the written scriptures there developed an “Oral Torah,” a tradition explaining how to interpret the scriptures and apply the Laws. The Oral Torah was written down in a document called the Mishnah. This was good. It helped clarify how the law should be applied.

But by the time of Jesus, the law had become tremendously complex – and it was a problem. Remember when Jesus and some of his boys are walking through a wheat field on the Sabbath? They’re hungry – so they strip the wheat from the stalks, and then they rubbed the grain between their hands to get to the good wheat germ. But the Pharisees come along and tell them what they are doing is unlawful on the Sabbath. Why? Because stripping the wheat was considered “reaping.” By the thinly sliced interpretations of the Pharisees, that was a violation of the Sabbath. And when they winnowed the wheat, that was considered “threshing.” That, too, was work on the Sabbath. So was any preparation of food, carrying water, or walking farther than your synagogue. And the peculiar thing about the Pharisees was that no discussion was allowed; no give and take; no compromise

on their decisions. It was all black or white, the Pharisee's way or the highway. Amazingly, the attempt to clarify the application of the Law actually made the Law more rigid. So Jesus turns the tables and asks them "Was humankind made for the Sabbath – or was the Sabbath made for humankind?" Jesus' point was that the Sabbath was meant by God for our refreshment, but that the Pharisees had turned it into laws so complex that no one could possibly keep them.

In the same way, the Pharisees condemned Jesus for healing a blind man on the Sabbath. What could be wrong with healing a person? Well, they said that was not appropriate on God's day. What was their rationale? That Jesus had spat upon the ground and used his fingers to work it into the dirt for a compress for the man's eyes and that was considered a form of kneading – forbidden by their rules. If McTavish represents the "Don't think, just do as I say" attitude, the Pharisees represent the "Make a law for everything, but forget about love" approach.

Eventually Jesus accused them of straining after fleas and swallowing camels because they were so fixated on petty laws that they forgot the greater love of God. They had placed the purity of their dogma over the integrity of love. And to Jesus that was not just a distortion of God's commandments; it was desertion.

There is a mystery and complexity to life which we hear reflected in the Isaiah we read today. We know things aren't so simple when we hear God say:

⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.

⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways.
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

In seminary I had an absolutely brilliant friend who would drive his car down to the Episcopal Church on Sunday, or to an appointment, or a class, and he would then walk home, forgetting that he had driven his car. It wasn't that he'd forgotten where he'd parked it, he'd forgotten that he'd driven. He would spend an hour looking for it in the parking lot of the Divinity School and then enlist the help of his friends. Sometimes his car would be lost for days until he stumbled upon it. But he told me, "Far better for me to forget my car than that I should forget the love of God."

Jesus said something like that. Don't strain after gnats, lest you forget the love of God. He gave us a new commandment, that we love one another as he loved us. He gave us the example of a life lived in love and humble service. In all of scripture there is no injunction more fundamental than that contained in these simple words: "Love one another." It appears so simple. But to learn the hard lesson of what it means to love one another – and to love whoever is in need – is a lifetime journey.

Many people these days have too little patience and almost no discipline for the long journey towards truth. They want simple answers and easy solutions, and if there aren't any, they pretend there are. They want a pill that help them lose weight without having to diet or exercise. They want a degree that will get them a high paying job without working their way up through levels of experience. They want all the rewards without the cost. They want to arrive at the end of the journey without the effort of making the journey even though the journey itself is the greatest reward.

Even some churches offer this no cost simple path to spiritual success. They reduce spiritual life to a list of quick fixes and either ignore or deny the hard questions. And if you ask those questions or raise your doubts, you risk being ostracized. They will make you feel there is something wrong with you for asking. This kind of Christianity – anti-intellectual, anti-science, anti-democratic – has given all of us Christians a reputation for being ignorant and shallow. They refuse to allow diversity of opinion and cut off healthy discussion.

The gospel is deeper and more complex than bumper sticker slogans and tired clichés. Life is challenging and love can be complex. That's why the church should be a place where matters of deep importance can be discussed in an atmosphere of respect and trust, a place where doubts, questions and other possibilities can be explored, where feelings and thoughts can be shared without fear of hostility and rejection. Christ walks with us on our journey towards truth, and we have not yet arrived. In an increasingly polarized and verbally abusive time, where else can souls meet to compare notes on the experience of living and the search for God if not here in the Church? It's here that we are to learn the patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control and forbearance that we need to mature in our faith.

Not quite two years ago, in Nickel Mines Pennsylvania, a man seized an Amish schoolhouse, and after releasing the boys killed five girls and wounded five others before killing himself. That someone was so violent was shocking but perhaps not surprising. What truly surprised the nation was the response of the Amish community, who are considered quaint and old-fashioned. Under tremendous stress and sadness, they responded with forgiveness and kindness to the shooter's family. They refused the temptation to react with venom and violence. They pulled together, took care of each other, and bore witness to Christian values. How could they do this? It didn't happen overnight. They had practice in what we all need – a lifetime of seriously living by the example of Christ.

In his book on Christian Ethics Improvisation, Samuel Wells says our recent approaches to ethics have been mistaken. He says, we seek strong and absolute stands on complex issues, and then find ourselves fighting with each other from

behind our rigid walls. Wells say life's difficult choices are rarely so clear cut and cannot be so scripted in advance. It would be simply impossible to write a guidebook for every possible situation in life. And Jesus clearly rejected that.

Wells says that the key to coping with the complexities of life consists in this (in what our new members have begun to do this morning): first, in embedding ourselves in Christian communities who teach us who we are, then deep-wiring the script of God's people through years of worship and study and service together. In worship, we gather to rehearse our identity in Christ every week, and then we leave here to live out our faith as God's people in the world. Then, as hard and confusing choices confront us, when evil confronts us in the form of violence and anger and hate – like that Amish community – we do the right thing instinctively because we know who we are and whose we are and we have a community of support we carry with us in our hearts.

The lone hero, the rugged individual, the sacred gunslinger doesn't make it. People are realizing that we need the church. We need corporate worship. We need a solid program of spiritual formation and Christian education to train us like so many spiritual athletes to be a finely tuned team. And we need – every one of us – to participate actively, regularly, faithfully – for each other's sake as well as our own. When you are not here, not only do you miss out, but a child misses the model they need to see in you, a struggling friend misses the word of encouragement you might offer, the whole team suffers. Only in community do we succeed in the hard task of turning our lives toward God.

It's a gift to be simple. Yes, it is. But we don't want the simple-minded literalism of a McTavish who only does what he is told. It's a gift to be simple, but no one said it was going to be easy. It's a gift to be simple, but only after we've learned to deal with life's complexities through the wisdom of God's love. It's a gift to be simple, but that gift really is achieved through the long practice and discipline of learning the way of Christ. It's a gift to be simple, and by God's grace we receive that gift when we are here.