

Live Simply  
12/11/05

I was in a gift shop recently. Can't recall which one as there have been quite a few! Probably one too many, for that matter! In any case, in the corner there was a sign for sale that read, "Live Simply." When my eye caught it, I immediately thought, "How perfect!" Then, after a brief moment, I thought to myself, "...but if you are trying to simplify, why buy one more thing to hang on an already cluttered wall?"

Which is really the crux of the matter. How do you simplify things in this world of today? It is no easy matter. When we moved to Maine a couple of years ago, it was my hope to simplify my lifestyle a bit. Certainly more than it was when I was always on the go and it seemed that I was out every evening at some church or community activity. I used the word "balance," telling people that I was trying to simplify things by creating a better balance in my daily life. Well, I think I have succeeded to some extent, but I can only guess at how far I have to go. It's a tough and uphill struggle.

There was a letter to the editor in the Portland press Herald this week that I read with amusement. This is how one man told his friends he is simplifying this Christmas season: "I write to tell you that I am giving you a very precious holiday gift. This year, I am doing no holiday shopping so you will not be receiving any package from me. This means you will not have to think about a gift for me or do any shopping for one. So my gift to you is the time you now have to yourself that might have otherwise been wasted." Pretty tricky way of getting out of exchanging presents, eh?

As my mother used to say when playing cribbage, and many a Red Sox Manager has said during an overly long season – "Desperate times demand desperate measures." The letter writer concludes by explaining that, of course, with more time on their hands, perhaps he and his friends can now manage to get together and catch-up on matters of life's importance. He suggests over a beer, although I doubt that is mandatory if you try such a thing! In any case, he makes some sense.

To remember the good times...the days when things always seem as if they must have been simpler. In part, that's why we appreciate and revere the Song of Praise that Mary shares concerning the imminent birth of Jesus. Known as the Magnificat, it is a song that praises God for such great mercy, extending favor upon her. It's not about shopping for baby clothes or awaiting a shower thrown by friends. It's about being filled with a new spirit and taking time to bathe in the wonder of it – "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." It's all about having the time to put things in perspective and not about rushing to the next task. Indeed, Mary is simply on a visit with her cousin, Elizabeth. She is responding to the baby jumping in her womb. Really, she is just taking time for the wonder of it all! It is the joy of feeling creation! Of reveling in each moment! Of course, things were so much simpler back then. Mary can afford to stay with Elizabeth for three more months and then return home.

The Catholics may have made a mistake bestowing such honor on Mary, elevating her almost to equal status with Jesus. For it truly is her humility and servant hood that are her true gifts. However, we should not relegate her to the back page of our sacred text either. She lives out her life in a manner that makes many of us envious, by taking an everyday event and developing a hymn of praise to God. Typically, we take daily events (i.e. Christmas) and say they are just cause for a shopping spree!

Henri Nouwen - remember I attended the New Hampshire Clergy Convocation this fall and heard from a person who knew this theologian and philosopher extremely well – concludes his book The Way of the Heart by discussing prayer in our daily lives. "How do we practice prayer," Nouwen asks "in a very restless ministry." In a world that affords so little time for spiritual matters? Answering this, he writes that prayer must be, what he terms "all-inclusive." "When we say to people 'I will pray for you,' we make a very important commitment. The sad thing is that this remark often remains nothing but a well meant expression of concern...but through prayer we must learn to carry in our heart all human pain and sorrow, all torture and war,

all hunger, loneliness and misery, not because of some great emotional or psychological capacity, but because God's heart has become one with ours." Nouwen's claim is that when we take upon ourselves the care of another, we care for our world, just as God does.

Isn't that fascinating! If we go back now to Mary and the Magnificat, that her song of praise is filled with tribute and concern for others! To Mary, God's mercy is limitless. So she sees in the ordinary occasion of her own pregnancy, how God lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty. Her prayer is not an expression of selfish delight, although you can certainly tell she is exceedingly pleased with her pregnancy. Rather, within her daily journey and during this especially blessed moment, she captures the spirit that remembers all God's people in their time of need.

So ask me now what this has to do with living simply. Basically we have become distracted by all we have. We are busy, consumed, stretched to the limit – and we know it. And....it's probably not going to change any time soon. We say "I must cut back," "Find more time," "purchase less, consume less" – and I think we need to work in these areas. But, while all this may be true, the problem may be that we need to learn how to integrate our spiritual lives into our daily lives. We talk too much without listening; we work too much without pausing; we forget that all we have is a result of God's blessing. We need to develop that side of the spirit that sees God in the daily and ordinary events and remembers that God is with us even when things go well. It's a discipline. Mary is a good mentor for us. No wonder this Sunday's theme is often Joy. As Mary lives faithfully, she constantly celebrates the actions of God in her daily life. One of the great gifts we can share with ourselves and our loved ones this season is to be more conscious of the God that abounds in our daily walk.

I once told children that they might try this. Walk around your neighborhood. Many of you walk anyway. As you do think of the people inside. And offer a little prayer. For the person who is living alone that they might have company. For the neighbor whose house needs painting. For the people you don't yet know, that perhaps in 2006 you can become acquainted. For the dog that looks so friendly. Our lives are cluttered. I suppose that's a fact we have to live with. Yet, let's think of ways to integrate God's presence into our busyness, being mindful that we are never alone!

Mary celebrates God's presence in her "simple" life and, in so doing, in all of life. It's a wonderful gift she has – to be able to see God's hand revealed in ordinary events. Yet, it's a gift we can all nurture – one we can nurture as we travel, at work, while shopping...as busy people whose lives are not as simple as we might hope.

"Living simply" does mean to simplify. Christmas always reminds us of how far we still have to go! Yet living simply also means to have the humility to see God in the "simple things" – the simple gifts if you will – and to strike up a conversation of daily praise and thanksgiving.

"May our soul magnify the Lord and rejoice in God, our savior."