

Living from the Divine Centre

MJCF

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Philippians 3:12-16

I'm amazed at all the things we've accumulated since we moved here from Japan, 13 years ago. We have a lot of stuff! I tend not to throw things out since "I may need them someday." Rie is better at getting rid of things she doesn't use. We've found the "Konmari" method of cleaning up to be inspiring. Marie Kondo explains ways to tidy up and let go of things that no longer spark joy. It does feel good to get rid of things that I haven't been using. I'm starting to realise the connection between the many things around us and the way we think. Just deciding to take a small pile of books to a recycle shop felt like clearing cobwebs out of my mind. I suddenly feel like I can think more clearly, which brings me to today's theme – a simple lifestyle. In our faith, it's easy to allow the clutter of competing thoughts to distract us from wholeheartedly focusing on Jesus Christ.

Traditionally, the Mennonite church has emphasised living simply, with a focus on Jesus Christ. They rejected the elaborate and expensive cathedrals, preferring to worship in more plain and simple buildings. The emphasis was in seeing the church as a people rather than the building itself. Many Mennonites rejected the fancy clothes, cars, and stuff emphasized by surrounding society. Today, the Old Order Mennonites, Hutterites, and Amish still emphasize a separation from the "worldly" things around them. Different groups draw the line in different places. Some decide to not accept electricity in their homes; some decide to not have cars, instead travelling by horse and buggy even in the winter. In our own Mennonite church groups around the world, we do not go to these extremes, but we do try to follow a simpler life than surrounding society. We work hard to not get caught up in trying to keep up with our neighbours, buying more and more things. Instead, we try to put energy into focusing on God and relationships with people around us.

The prophet Isaiah describes the focus of a simple life when he says, "You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, all whose thoughts are fixed on you!" It's a focused life of trusting in God. In Philippians, the Apostle Paul says something similar. "...Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."(3:13-14) Paul sees himself as not having yet reached his goal. All followers of Jesus are "on the way." There is always room for us to grow as we face various challenges in life. As Paul grows in Christ he knows there could be suffering involved, but because God raised Jesus to life, Paul can live with the knowledge that God's "resurrection" power is stronger than any suffering he may experience. God is stronger even than death. Paul now strives to make Christ his own, just as Christ has made him his own. How does he focus his life on Christ? First, he tries to forget the things that lie behind him. He decides not to focus on his past achievements. We may be tempted to relax and think that we've "done enough for God," but Paul intentionally decides not to rest on his accomplishments. For us, what matters is where God is leading right now. God's purposes in us continue. The second thing Paul does is to reach out, straining forward to what lies ahead. In the original Greek text, the meaning is similar to that of an athlete straining forward, reaching for the finish line tape. A simple life is a life with focus. It's a life of letting go of past things that may distract, and focusing on the goal of following Jesus.

The writer of the book of Hebrews uses a similar image in chapter 12. "...Let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross..." Jesus is both our example to follow, as well as the one who gives us the strength to do it. We'll sometimes face challenges. Jesus' faithfulness led to his death on a cross. God then blessed him, raising him to new life as Lord of all. Through him, we experience forgiveness for our sins, and his Spirit continues to work in us. The problem is the voice of the Spirit gets lost among the many other things we think about each day.

Every day, we have competing ideas in our minds. These are the weights and sins that cling so closely, slowing us down in our efforts to grow as followers of Jesus. Often our thoughts are filled with all kinds of “clutter.” Did I say the right thing in my conversation with my son? What can I say to encourage my brother? Do I work now, or do I relax? Do I make a phone call to someone, or do I instead take out the vacuum cleaner and tidy up? Which task should I do first? It’s easy to get bogged down in all the decisions that constantly need to be made, especially if our main focus each day is unclear. But, if we keep Jesus at the centre of our lives, things will much more readily fall into place. It will be easier to decide what needs to be done now, and what can wait, because through prayer we’ll have clearer priorities throughout the day. We fill our lives with so many “good and important things to do” that we miss doing the “most important things,” those things that we need to do in order to grow in our relationship with God. To live simply is to have the freedom to say “No” to even good things, in order to say “Yes” to the best things.

In my life, I notice that I love to focus deeply on one thing at a time. The problem is that as I focus, I sometimes forget there sometimes more important things that also need to be done. I pour myself into message preparation and forget that there’s more to being a pastor than just preaching. I pray that I can grow in following opportunities to connect with people through various ways beyond just the Sunday message. Also, during message preparation, I may forget the importance of connecting with my family, or I may neglect my sleep, staying up too late. I think part of this has to do with a deep down, strong desire to make my best message each time. But, I need to ask myself, is God asking me to neglect my family, my health, and my relationships with others so that I can make my best Sunday message? I don’t think so. Here, I need to look at my motivation. I confess that I often care too much about how others may see me. That concern for myself is something that can easily distract me from following God more closely. I believe God is calling me to focus more and more on the way of Jesus Christ. I have a lot of room to grow in letting go of deep concerns related to myself, and I pray that my focus on God can become simpler and clearer as God helps me let go of my self-centredness.

As we run the race of life, where is our focus? Is it on ourselves? Sin causes us to be self-centred. Many Christians end up with God being at the edge rather than at the centre of their lives. Some Christians really only think about God on Sundays. Many Christians only think about God when they are in trouble and in need of help. 1st Thessalonians 5:17 says, “pray without ceasing.” It’s an encouragement to keep our focus on God as much as possible. It will take practice to increase our awareness of God in both good and challenging times. But, striving to live minute by minute with trust in Christ is a joyous adventure. One writer kept track of the amount he spent in prayer and thoughts of God. As he wrote in his journal each day, he wrote at the top of his page the percentage of time that he thought he’d spent with God during each day. Some days were at 50%, others were at 10%. It was an interesting experiment to see how much time he could spend focusing his thoughts, as he went about his daily tasks.

One of our greatest challenge is to “practice the presence of God” in all we do. In the 17th century, Brother Lawrence was a cook in a Carmelite monastery, known for practicing the presence of God. He once said, “The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament.” He worked at being aware of God’s presence in all he did, not just at worship services. We too need to work at keeping God at the centre in whatever we do, whether it be jogging, watching TV, sending a text, or doing laundry...

So, how can we keep our focus on Christ? Some try first to stop thinking of themselves. But, the more we try to do that, the more we will be thinking about ourselves. Instead, what we need to do is focus on Jesus, seeking first the kingdom of God in our lives. As we fill our thoughts with short prayers for God’s leading and for other people, thoughts of our selves will be replaced. As we pray, we’ll want

to also obey God as much as possible. True prayers change our lives and the lives of those for whom we pray. The evidence will be seen in our actions. Hebrews 3:7-8 says, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts...” It takes courage to step into something new. Yet, because we are all “sinners”, we will have times when we fail. At those times we need to be ready to get up and keep going. We will fail. What we need to learn is the habit of confessing and returning to God when we fail. Often our failures have to do with the times we run ahead of God rather than waiting for God to lead. Sitting in prayer as well as obedient action are two sides of the same coin. They need to work together.

The author, Richard Foster has written much on the “freedom of simplicity.” He talks about a number of tensions that are part of the journey towards greater simplicity. Simplicity is both an inner reality and an outward lifestyle. “The outer expression...must flow from the inner resources.” To be able to live simply is both a gift from God as well as a discipline. On one hand, we need to work at it. On the other hand, we can only live simply by the grace of God. To live simply is both simple and difficult. As we seek to grow in following a simple life, there will likely be times of struggle and difficulty, but there will also be times when we realise how naturally we receive the simple life as a gift of God. Also, as we strive towards greater simplicity by letting go of things that distract us, we need to keep in balance the reality that material things are also good, but in a limited way. As physical beings, we need food, shelter, clothing, and other material things in order to live well. At the same time, we need to limit the accumulation of so many “extra things” that end up distracting us.

A life of simplicity is a life of trust and focus on Jesus Christ. This way of life frees us to live generously. We’ll feel free to share more and more with others because we’ll have a deep sense of how much God provides for us. We’ll be content with what we have. Our identity won’t be in our nicer car, our newer phone, or even in the many things we’ve learned, or in our family reputation. Our identity will be solidly anchored in God. Let’s pray.

O Lord, life can feel so complicated. We confess that your voice easily gets lost among all the other voices clamoring for attention in our thoughts. We confess that we often put ourselves at the centre of our lives and only call on you when we need help. Forgive us, we pray. Forgive us for the times when we’ve allowed thoughts of our faith to become too complicated. Thank-you that we are invited to accept your love, simply, as a child. Loving God, help us to let go of all those things that distract us. We long to reach your “heavenly call...in Jesus Christ.” Grant us the courage to put our trust solidly in you, rather than in material things. Teach us to practice your presence in all we do, that our thoughts may become more and more your thoughts. Thank-you that as we experience changes in life due to this pandemic, we can trust that you are at work among us no matter what. In Christ, we pray, Amen.