

July 3, 2011

**[Ordinary 15A Communion & Nation: Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Los Angeles, CA]
Psalm 37.3-9**

“Tis a Gift to Be Simple”

Matthew 11.16-19, 25-30

In 1774, about the time America was becoming a nation, a small religious group known as the Shakers had begun to arrive on these shores from England for religious freedom, among the many blessings of liberty we celebrate tomorrow. If we know anything about the Shakers, we probably know they had some strange ideas. Their name comes from the fact that they danced, or “shook”—hence “shaking” or Shakers—dancing as a group and shaking into a state of religious ecstasy. Shakers believed in the equality of the sexes and in celibacy. One could be married and join the group, but had to be celibate from then on, and live in single-sex dormitories. They believed they would perpetuate themselves by conversion. The last of the Shakers today are three people in Sabbathday Lake, Maine.

The Shakers got one thing right, though, they believed in being simple. They produced furniture that’s imitated even today because of its elegant simplicity. So, too, with their poetry and music. They had a genius for finding the peace and beauty that dwells in simplicity. “Tis the Gift to Be Simple” is the hymn for which they’re best known.* We also know the tune in the hymn “Lord of the Dance.” Several years ago a prestige automaker used the melody as background music for a commercial touting a new model. Ironically, it was the kind of luxury car that’s the very antithesis of the simplicity the Shakers sought and lived.

That figures, because we humans are pretty self-contradictory. We want the blessings of the simple life, but we’d like to have them in the midst of a comfortable middle-class lifestyle. We didn’t invent this attitude in the last century, and while we’re developing this perspective into a fine art in the 21st century, we humans have always been this way, because the inclination is part of our nature.

It’s this attitude Jesus is speaking about in our gospel lesson. He says that his generation—and ours—is like children calling to one another and saying, “We

played the flute and you didn't dance; we wailed and you didn't mourn." That is, no matter what we do, you're not satisfied. This is typical of us who haven't learned to find happiness in the basics of life, in its simplicities. We're never really happy. Give us music or give us mourning, Jesus says, and it makes no difference. We just don't seem to know how to grab on to life, either in its joys or sorrows.

Jesus does not speak in vague theological or spiritual terms. He speaks specifically of the way many people have responded—or not—to his preaching and teaching. They've heard his message, seen him heal the sick and bless the poor, yet only a very few have allowed it to change them. Admire him, yes; change us, no. So what about us? Sometimes we'd give almost anything to see Jesus first hand, or to observe a real, unmistakable miracle. But, in truth, we'd probably just respond the way they did back then. A few of us would hear his message and be transformed, but the majority would continue in our old ways. Jesus says that even though John the Baptist was a vegan and a teetotaler, people accused him of having a demon because he spoke the uncomfortable word of God. And when Jesus himself came speaking that same discomfiting word, and ate and drank the normal fare of his culture with social outcasts, he was accused of being a drunkard and a glutton. He asks in so many words, how can you please these people? At least his acts of mercy vindicate his preaching and teaching.

At least part of the issue is that we insist on living complicated lives. In the midst of his frustration over how people miss the point of his teachings, Jesus suddenly prays, "I thank you, Father . . . 'cause you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants." He knows that only those who are spiritual children will understand the wisdom of his words. Then he offers what may well be the most comforting invitation ever extended.

As rendered in the King James Version, he says, “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

A great many of us carry heavy loads. Many of us and people we know bear the grief of loss, the tragedy of dysfunctional family relationships, the weight of serious ailments, the despair of unemployment, the constant anxiety of homelessness, and on top our personal burdens we see the weight of the world. We see it in the television news every evening and in the faces of crowds in newspaper photographs—reports from several battlefields around the world and settings of natural and human-made disasters. We see it in the countenance of our fellow travelers when we ride public transportation or, if we drive, we get the message on the freeway or at the stoplight. Not many of God’s folk seem to be anything but knocked down, kicked around, and run over. In light of this general malaise, Jesus says to us, “Hey, all you who are worn out and beaten down, come here! Put down your load and take a break. You’ll find rest and strength with me. Bind yourself to me, and the weight we’ll carry together will be light and easy.”

But, guess what? Tis a gift to be simple and accept Jesus’ invitation! Not low I.Q. simple, but Shaker simple. We have to be simple enough to believe that someone cares enough about us to be interested in our burdens. Simple enough to trust that Jesus is able to carry our load. And, most important, simple enough to recognize that we’re heavily-laden, especially us Type-A personalities. This is where our complicated minds and lives mess us up. It’s quite another thing to recognize we have burdens we need to be rid of. That’s why we so often cling to our loads, because we don’t realize they’re weighing us down. We like all this stuff that burdens us, these things that add to our worries. We shop for them, look

them up on the internet, drive all the way to the manufacturers outlet mall to get them. This grasping doesn't apply simply to our major possessions—our houses, autos, and investments. It's all our gadgets, the whole fabric of our lives and the way we tie ourselves up with worries and fears, longing and seeking, anxiety and envy.

François Mauriac, the 20th century French novelist and Nobel Prize winner for literature, looking back on his own childhood, said there's "a state of grace natural to childhood." Yes, it's tied to childhood's innate simplicity. Yet in many cultures today, parents often unknowingly rob childhood of its innocence by flooding their children's lives with complexity—innumerable playstations, smart phones, i-pads, piano and dance lessons, team sports, special get-ahead-in-life classes, and so on. We not only don't recognize the burdens in our own lives, we try to introduce the same millstones to our kids, preferably as early as possible. The best pre-school, kindergarten, grade school, middle school, high school, university, and all the highly stressful preparation that goes with getting into them.

Yet Jesus didn't say life would be burden-free, by any means. Heavy loads are written into life. It isn't a matter of living without burdens, but of what kind of weight we'll carry, and how. Jesus says his yoke is easy, and lightens our load. How can this be? How can a yoke be easy, since a yoke is something that constrains and controls the person or animal it's placed upon, and is there to help us pull the load? What makes Jesus' yoke easy? Well, many of us confuse a yoke with a harness, because we're so far removed from rural culture. A harness is for one animal, but a yoke is for two. It allows two animals to work together, thereby lightening the load that might be too heavy for one to bear alone. If we accept Jesus' yoke, we're linked to him. He's the strong one, sharing our burden, very literally pulling for us. We work together with him who strengthens us, who

bears the weight we carry in life, who transforms our burdens into joys.

The yoke of Jesus is eternal and puts human life into perspective. Why do we worry about so many things? he asks. Why do we fret away our lives over matters that, a week later, we can't even remember? Because we don't have an eternal perspective on our life. Jesus' yoke is his claim on us, everything else is frivolous. We make life dreadfully complicated when we give temporal matters everlasting significance. No wonder our burdens are heavy when we treat so many passing things as if they were the stuff of eternity.

Jesus offers us a wonderful invitation. Looking out at the weight-laden crowd, he says, "Lighten up! You're carrying such unnecessarily heavy burdens." He knows, however, that those of us who consider ourselves "wise and intelligent"—we poor fools—will continue to cling to our loads, adoring them, worrying ourselves sick over them, because we're caught up in making life even more complicated than it need be. Jesus knows that only the spiritual infants among us will grasp his message of simplicity.

Tomorrow we celebrate Independence Day. Most of us are very conscious of the privilege we have to live in freedom. We know well enough this country isn't perfect, but we're grateful—immigrant and native-born alike!—thankful that our ancestors in liberty gave us a special kind of political and religious freedom. Unfortunately, our forefathers and mothers weren't able to liberate us from our loads and burdens. They were unable to deliver us from our everyday fears and grasping, worries and anxieties. Fortunately, they didn't have to. Jesus does this. "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Because Jesus' yoke puts life into perspective, we know what's important to us not

just for today, not just for the next 20 years, but what's important for eternity.

We can learn a lesson from the Shakers, who got one thing right from Jesus' teachings, "Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free," as free and simple as a child who takes Jesus at his word.

AMEN!

* 'Tis the gift to be simple, / 'tis the gift to be free, / 'tis the gift to come down
where we ought to be, / and when we find ourselves in the place just right, /
'twill be in the valley of love and delight.

Refrain:

When true simplicity is gained, / to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed, /
to turn, turn, will be our delight / till by turning, turning we come round right.

'Tis the gift to be loved and that love to return / 'Tis the gift to be taught and a
richer gift to learn, / And when we expect of others what we try to live each
day, / Then we'll all live together and we'll all learn to say,

Refrain:

'Tis the gift to have friends and a true friend to be, / 'Tis the gift to think of others
not to only think of "me," / And when we hear what others really think and really
feel, / Then we'll all live together with a love that is real.

Refrain: