

Rev. Maeve Hammond
“Walking towards the Cross: Simplicity”
Matthew 6:19-21, 16:24-26
February 25, 2024

If you’ve ever been to Concord and walked through the Walden Pond State Reservation, or if you’ve read about transcendentalism and nineteenth-century naturalism on your own or in school, you may have heard this quote by Henry David Thoreau: “Simplify, simplify.” But, you may not have heard Ralph Waldo Emerson’s reply. Thoreau reflects on humanity’s call to distraction and complication and urges us to pare down: “Our lives are frittered away with detail. Simplify, simplify.” To this, Emerson responds, “One ‘simplify’ would have sufficed.”

I brought in this exchange between Thoreau and Emerson because it’s funny and charming, and I also think there’s truth to what both of them are saying. Sometimes, I really wish it were possible for us, everyone on the globe, to collectively take a day off to rest and to simplify the tasks on our to-do list down to our most basic needs as humans: shelter, water, food, rest, companionship.

Did you notice that the Scripture readings are very short and come from only one section of the Bible, the Gospel of Matthew? That was intentional—to, as Thoreau said, simplify our focus today and repeat what we’ve heard. So, let’s listen again, and, as we listen, consider what the text calls you to meditate upon—what words, phrases, images stand out to you? Why do you think that is?

From the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 6: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, 20 but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

From chapter 16: “24 Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit

them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?”

Traditionally, our Jewish siblings have considered God's Scriptures our companion throughout our lives. We read, and reread, and meditate on, and go for a walk and think, and come back, and read, and crinkle the pages, and mark up the margins, and maybe even spill a drop of tea or coffee on our Bibles because it is the sacred text that provides us with endless and new meaning. Even the simplest, most repeated, shortest passages can give us new life. Every word is there for a reason—even the maddening, sexist, ancient (in its literal and figurative sense), violent, and problematic words that I often feel like I need to skip over to protect my sanity and my own faith—I'm looking at you, Leviticus and 1 Timothy.

Do not store up treasures on earth...but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. In other words, why focus our attention on flashing, inundating distractions of false promises? Why not allow ourselves to turn our gaze elsewhere more steeped in divinity? During Lent, we consider how we may shift our focus from distractions in our lives and open ourselves to a deeper understanding of God and self? We store our treasure where we put our attention. Where have you been putting yours?

A few weeks ago, I preached about the Nap Ministry and Jesus's many moments of resting, sleeping, and removing himself from others to pray, meditate, contemplate, and recharge. Remember, Jesus's ministry is a radical, multifaceted approach to community care and divine love. Yes, Jesus is incredibly active: he travels across the ancient world, preaches to crowds, enters into strangers' homes, heals bodies through touch, flips tables, yells, and asks imposing questions. But, we've also seen the gentlest side of Jesus—he who is more reserved, a listener, an observer, a giver, empathetic, intuitive, and extremely aware of his needs and his community's needs. Jesus embodies many paths to the cross. I invite you to consider if embracing the quiet of simplicity could be one of them that you take up during Lent.

It's all good to think about how we may emulate their mindful awareness, how we may pare down our lives to live fully and gratefully in the world God has provided for us. But, as I say these words, I recognize and appreciate that it is so much harder said than done. At the beginning of this year, I wanted to take up my own cross of simple living. In 2024, I committed myself to a no-buy lifestyle. The premise is that I am trying to honor intentional simplicity by not buying anything material or physical other than 1) necessities and 2) investments in simple joy. Two months into my no-buy year so far, I have become much more mindful of my spending habits. I've quit caffeine, so my weekly (sometimes daily) coffee run is out. Though the aisles of bookstores and shops tempt me, I only buy things that I cannot make myself or find use for in my house. My local library branch in JP knows me and my Goodreads list almost too well at this point, and I've become creative with gift-giving, housework, and clothing. As some of you know, I've sewn clothes and gifts for several years now, and I've recently learned to knit and crochet scarves (gifts) and dishrags (no more investing in disposable plastic scrubbies). I've also tried to take a moment each day of complete silence to allow myself a moment to recharge, listen to my brain and body, without external input from my phone or even a book.

I would be a hypocrite if I told you walking to the cross by the way of quiet, simple living has been easy-breezy and flawless. It's been harder than I'd thought to rely on what I already have—not look outward to what I *could* have—and sit with myself in my moments of quiet solitude. It's uncomfortable and tiring to change habits. However, this commitment has brought me closer to living out a values-based life that (hopefully) reduces my consumption as a consumer, challenges my creativity and innovation, and allows me to check in with myself and care for myself more often.

Last Monday, as part of our Lenten Series, Buddhist Minister Sunada Tagaki led a group of us in a couple of meditations and reflections on restful awareness. Sunada explored mindfulness as a concept much richer and deeper than what popular media and wellness influencers and brands portray. If you don't think learning from a Buddhist is for you, I invite you

to think again—Sunada’s message is one all of us could hear. Mindfulness is about attention: awareness of our inner selves and the details of the world around us. In order to really love others, as the old adage goes, we have to learn to love ourselves. This begins with an intentional self-awareness of who we really are, what we really need, how our body feels and reacts, what thoughts come up for us when we’re quiet, when we’re not choosing distraction. By practicing self-awareness, we have an amazing opportunity to connect deeper with the sacred presence and get to know ourselves and our needs better. One of my favorite Sunada quotes from Monday is “animals are masters at meditation.” Think of how your cat or dog immerses themselves so easily into the world around them: the peace of just lying in the sun, the joy of hearing their human come home from work, the purrs and tailwags when they receive love and warmth. Non-human animals are so ready to embrace the world around them, take notice of the details that paint the canvas of their world, and find satisfaction in the fulfillment of basic needs. After practicing self-awareness, we, too, may be attuned enough to find satisfaction in the fulfillment of our basic needs.

This reminds me, a few days ago, a member of the congregation and I went for a walk around Horn Pond. We saw a family throwing food (seed, not bread) to the pond’s birds. Tens of geese and ducks jumping out of the water and trying to get some food on an icy patch of the pond. The humans visiting their home stood around, absolutely transfixed on these non-human animals finding playful fulfillment in God’s creation.

Ice-skating goose

On the dulled surface of an icy pond,
A young family throws seeds
To a gaggle of geese and a flock of ducks.

In the center of the water,
The seeds catch the eye of a goose,
Who gives a startled cry.

He thrashes, bounding out of the pond,

Wings outstretched,
Eyes locked, fervent, hungry.

A flurry of cries follows him,
Tearing out of their colonies,
Clamoring with delight at the generosity of strangers.

Black and orange webbed feet waddle
Like toddlers clinging to a bucket at an ice rink,
Step-by-step, sliding, tumbling, falling on a feathered landing.

Geese can look so large,
Ducks can look so dainty,
People can be moving pictures in their stories.

I hope these reflections can inspire you to try out simple living in the image of Christ, whatever that means to you, for a day or a week. You don't need to give up caffeine or start knitting your own dish-scrubs and making your own clothes. But, how can you attune to your body and to the world around you? How can you settle into simplicity? How can you embrace and embody Christ's gentler, quieter side? How can you gain the self-awareness to heal, to rest, and to feel fulfilled in this strange, miraculous life? Amen.