

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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A couple of months ago I watched the documentary “Minimalism” on Netflix. I’m a junky for documentaries, and this one seemed especially interesting. The description caught my eye with its rejection of American consumerism by emphasizing “less is more,” and of course it’s promise that it would bring me happiness. Who doesn’t want to be happier? In the documentary, the people interviewed had given up material possessions to one degree or another. On the extreme end were 2 men who had quit their high-paying jobs in corporate America to live a minimalist lifestyle. One of the men boasted of owning less than 300 items.

This concept of minimalism, and living with less, has been an increasing interest of mine, especially after I changed careers 3 years ago and started seminary. Minimalism also fits with what Jesus tells his disciples when he sends them out two by two in our passage for today. Jesus has the disciples “take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.” It often feels that this seminary process forces us seminarians to take literally these instructions of Jesus. With all of the moving I have done and will do for this seminary process (which is 5 moves in 4 years btw) having less stuff to

move is definitely advantageous. But, after 3 moves, I still have a lot of stuff. I have not been following these instructions of Jesus very well.

So it begs the question, are these instructions a universal truth for all times, or are these instructions only for this particular journey in this particular Gospel? What are we to do with the instructions Jesus gives his disciples in our passage for today?

There are arguments on both sides. The argument that this is a universal truth fits with the overall message of Jesus. A few chapters after our text for today Jesus has an interaction with a rich man. In the end Jesus tells the rich man to give up all of his possessions. The rich man walks away from Jesus sad, because he has many possessions that he realizes he cannot part with. The moral of the story is that we must give up our physical possessions, and that this is the only way to follow Jesus.

Then there is the argument that this is not a universal truth, but only for this particular journey. First, the span of time for this evangelism journey would have been short. We don't know the exact time, but it would have been at most a few weeks. There would be no need to bring a lot of stuff for a short trip. Second, Jesus was counting on the hospitality of the Jewish people in the area to help the disciples. This is something that was well known about the Jewish people of the time. Strangers could count on the radical hospitality of the Jewish people when travelling. Jesus knew this hospitality would get his disciples through their evangelism journey.

I believe we don't have to choose between these two arguments, however. In fact, I propose that it is a combination of the two.

To explain this I'd like to come back to the Minimalism documentary. In the documentary, the common thread is that physical stuff, or physical baggage, holds people back from achieving their goals. For example, it prevents them from having a family or pursuing a career they love. But it's not just physical baggage that can hold us back from achieving our goals. The stuff in our souls and minds can hold us back as well. This spiritual baggage can keep us from achieving our goals as well. You can see an example of this spiritual baggage at play at the beginning of our passage for today. At first the people in the hometown of Jesus were in awe of who Jesus had become. "How learned he is!" they said. "He seems so wise" they said. But then, these people remembered the Jesus they knew as a child. They remembered Jesus as the son of a carpenter. They remembered his humble beginnings. All of a sudden, their spiritual baggage about Jesus got in the way. This spiritual baggage prevented the people in the hometown of Jesus from believing in him and receiving eternal life.

We all have spiritual baggage in our lives. We get away from the basics of our faith, and start to add embellishments. Sometimes it could be a wrong belief. Sometimes it could be our pasts trying to hold us back. Whatever it is, the question we should ask ourselves is the same: What holds us back from fully following Jesus? Using the language of the minimalist movement, What are the spiritual things in our lives that God is leading us to cut out, in order to be able to more fully follow God's call in our life?

The criteria with which we can base whether we need to cut something out is this: It's in whether it makes us open to being in community with other people. If the thing we are feeling led to cut out of our life would bring us into better community with other people, then we might need to cut it out.

When we are in community, we can better help each other.

One day a special old saint, during her evening prayers, asked God to show her what heaven and hell would be like.

In the twinkling of an eye the woman was transported through time and space until she found herself standing before the gates of hell. It was not at all what she expected. She was struck with the beauty of the place. Ahead of her she saw a huge banquet room with long tables filled with food. It was the most delicious food she had ever seen.

All of the residents of hell were seated about the tables. They all looked normal except for one very important difference. All of the people had very large arms, nearly six feet in length. At the end of each arm was a fork, but the people were unable to eat because no one had an elbow. Even though all of the food was so close at hand, they were unable to put the forks into their mouths.

Suddenly the woman was transported to heaven. Ahead of her were gleaming white gates. When she walked into the celestial city she was surprised to see that things looked very much like they did in hell. Ahead of her was a banquet table, quite similar to the one she had seen moments before. The food looked amazingly similar.

As the woman walked closer to the table, she could see that people were built identically to those in hell. All had long arms with no elbows, and forks at the end. But here, people knew what they needed to do. Each person simply loaded his or her fork and then reached out across the table to a friend. The situations were identical except for this one thing: in heaven people fed each other.

People of Wicker Park Lutheran Church, sometimes our spiritual life can get bogged down by too much baggage. When this happens, we can apply minimalist concepts of our faith life, which means using the criteria of, does cutting out this belief, practice, or action, bring me into closer community with other people? Because it's in community where we find the true meaning of heaven.