

1 Session

LIVE SIMPLY

If you wish to be perfect, go and sell all your possessions and give to the poor...and come, follow me.

Matthew 19:21

GATHERING PRAYER

Lord Jesus,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly.

St. Richard, Bishop of Chichester (13th century)

REFLECTION ON EXPERIENCE

In the poem below Elise Maclay reflects on keeping and giving away possessions. She invites us to reflect on how we use our possessions.

WORLDLY GOODS

I'm giving away my things
And it turns out to be
As much of an occupation
And as much fun

As collecting them was.
I browse among my friends the way
I used to browse in shops.
I try to decide who should have the cameo
I wore as a bride, who would like
My Chinese vase. I go through closets and drawers
And am amazed at what I find.
So many objects. I am ashamed
To have so much when so many have so little.
Worse still, there are a lot of things I hardly ever use.
This handsome fish poacher, for example.
Hammered copper. It came from France.
I used it once or twice. We thought a meal had to be
Meat and potatoes. The kids know better.
My daughter-in-law, Jill, eats only vegetables and fish.
She says it saves grain for the hungry and is a less
aggressive way
To live. Bless her heart, she is a gentle child.
She'll love this poacher, and my silver napkin rings
(She won't use paper napkins—says she wants no tree
To die to wipe her mouth). It takes forever,
Sorting things, I stop to think about where and when
And I find myself thinking, I may have use for this again.
Nonsense. I don't bake angel food cakes anymore,
Give the pan away. Funny, I thought I'd feel a sense of loss
With fewer of my things around.
I don't.
I feel exhilarated, free.
Is this why You told the rich man to sell his goods?
I used to think You meant to help the poor.

I think now Your command
Was meant to help the rich man more.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- G When have you experienced a “getting rid of possessions?”
How did it make a difference in your approach to living?
- G How do the last four lines of the poem fit with the way
you think of your relationship to your possessions?

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

Then someone came to Jesus and said, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?”

Jesus said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.”

The man said to Jesus, “Which ones?”

Jesus said, “You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and mother; also, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

The young man said to him, “I have kept all these; what do I still lack?”

Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then, come, follow me.”

When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Matthew 19:16-22

Jesus makes a radical demand on the young man. To follow Jesus is to give one's all. What this may mean for us today is to let go of possessions that possess us. Jesus challenges us not to be preoccupied with wealth, money, and possessions. One cannot "serve God and money," he says in Matthew 6:24. Whatever we deem valuable, we will set our hearts and minds to attain—"Wherever your treasure is, there is your heart" (Matthew 6:21).

Following the story of the rich young man, Jesus speaks to his disciples. "Truly I say to you, it is harder for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven." Matthew emphasizes the words of Jesus by beginning them "Truly I say to you." In this emphatic saying, Jesus insists it is hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven, but he does not say it is impossible. Rather valuing the kingdom of heaven is difficult when riches vie for importance (Matthew 19:23-26). Jesus has wealthy followers, such as Joseph of Arimathea, Zacchaeus, and Matthew. The point is not to make a god of riches but to make God rich in one's life.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- G What challenges do you face in efforts to live a simple way of life in an American culture of consumerism and materialism?
- G How necessary (or realistic) is a life of simplicity to living an authentic Christian life?

SCRIPTURE AND FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Francis of Assisi often turned to scripture for guidance. Jesus' invitation to the rich young man influenced Francis's whole direction in life: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then, come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21).

Francis is intriguing. A son of a wealthy merchant, Francis enjoyed life, his peers liked him, and as a troubadour in the streets, he attracted many. In the war between Assisi and Perugia, Francis dressed in battle armor and rode his horse to protect Assisi. He was a gallant young man. In the war Francis was captured and imprisoned. Because he became ill in prison, Perugia released Francis to be sent home to his mother's nursing care.

Francis recovered, but he was different. He opened his eyes to see things he had not noticed before. Francis spent time examining the close relationship between nature and humans and naming Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Fire, Sister Water, Brother Wolf, Sister Dog, and even Sister Death. Francis saw all as his brothers and sisters to be treated with respect and dignity.

Francis noticed the poor, the destitute, and the outcasts and treated these "lowly ones" differently. One time while walking along the road, Francis saw a leper, ran up to him, and kissed his wounds. Francis took money and clothes from his father's business and gave them to the poor. When Francis' father found out, he disowned him.

Francis then put on the clothes of the peasant—a simple,

brown pullover habit, a cowl, a cord for his belt and sandals. He begged food from the rich and gave it to the poor. Amazingly, this radical vagabond attracted many followers. Francis developed relationships with the poor yet maintained friendships with the wealthy.

In pursuing the Gospel way of life, Francis embarked on a life of poverty. In his simple way of life, Francis chose “freedom from” attachments and “freedom for” relationships. Living simply like Francis can free us to accept ourselves as we really are and allow us to see others as like ourselves. We become more open, rather than judgmental or condescending. Voluntary poverty can free us to be ourselves and see ourselves without pretense. It can lead us to become humble and recognize we are all human, of the “humus,” earthbound. Living simply can free us to extend ourselves to others equally and fairly.

In Francis’ time poor people lacked power and social esteem. They lived in insecure dependence in a feudal system in which royalty, landowners, and merchants accumulated money, influence, knowledge, and power. Francis mandated his friars not to possess or receive money, for status created inequality. He insisted they not buy horses for travel, for horses were considered a status symbol.

Francis disrobed in public after renouncing his father’s inheritance. His action demonstrated his loss of status. Poverty, for Francis, meant letting go of power, prestige, and status. Francis ventured forth to beg alms, embracing a life of insecurity, vulnerability, and dependence. With no inherited wealth, he lived with the poor, who lived outside the city.

Francis referred to the poor as “my brothers in Christ.” If, like Francis, we live a spirit of poverty, our choices will show outwardly in our lifestyle. The spirit of poverty lives inside the heart. In this spirit we see what we have as gifts given to us. All belongs to God. What we receive as gifts are to be shared with others. Material things—food, clothing, shelter—are good. Wasn’t Jesus wrapped at birth in swaddling clothes?

However, if material things distract us from focusing attention on God, then Francis challenges us to change our behavior. Poverty, viewed as destitution, is not a value. Poverty becomes a value when it centers on living like Jesus, who was born in a lowly stable. Francis set up the crèche scene at Greccio to remember that Jesus was born in poverty. From birth to his death on the cross, Christ lived and died poor. Francis’ view of poverty was like Christ’s. In this way, Francis teaches us to look at everything through the eyes of poverty.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Choose one or more to share.

- G Whom do you know who has made a conscious, radical choice to live simply like Francis and Jesus?
- G How would you argue for or against the assertion that poverty frees us? When have you experienced this in your life?
- G How would you distinguish living in poverty from living the spirit of poverty?

- G What insights have you gleaned from Francis's life that support the value of poverty as a way of life?
- G How do you understand the beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God" (Matthew 5.3)?

GOSPEL LIVING

Reflect on how you can live the Gospel way of poverty. Make a commitment to act on one or more of the ways listed below. Share your intention with the group. When you gather again, share how you are living your commitment. List ways that you can concretely—

- G Choose between needs and wants.
- G Receive all as gift.
- G Share what you have with others.
- G Put God first in your life.
- G Value relationships.
- G Build community.

In what ways are you living simply? Living the spirit of poverty?

PRAYER

Let us pray the Prayer of St. Francis, keeping in mind his model of simple living.

Lord, make me a channel of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon.

Where there is doubt, faith.

Where there is despair, hope.

Where there is darkness, light.

Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much
seek to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive.

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.

And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.