

THE SIMPLE TABLE

Matthew 6:25-27

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This is a season of so much noise. The bells rung by the volunteers holding the Salvation Army kettles. Commercials on the radio, commercials on television. The UPS truck backing up, the UPS driver ringing the doorbell. The beeps of the cash registers, the sounds of phones. The cacophony as you leave one store and walk into another, one store playing “Little Drummer Boy”, one store playing “Rock around the Christmas Tree.” When you’ve heard those songs until they make you want to scream, they’re no longer considered music. They’re noise.

This is a season that can assault our eyes as well as our ears. The morning paper is heavy with ads. Try to make sense of them. Try to figure out which store has the best deal on the gift you need to buy. Your eyes will glaze over.

This is a season of excess. Too much traffic. Too many people standing in line. Too much to do, too much to eat. Too many assaults on our senses. And everywhere, everywhere, so much stuff.

What does any of it have to do with the birth of a baby? What does any of it have to do with the one later called the prince of peace?

Now I know that many people look forward to Christmastime all year round. I know there are people who can not wait for the radio stations to start to play Christmas music, people who truly enjoy decorating every inch of their home, putting out special

items that mean a lot to them. I know people who love making cookies, writing cards, wrapping packages.

But for many people, Christmas is a time of joy mixed with stress, happiness combined with anxiety. It is a time of contrasting emotions. We are eager, yet frazzled; sentimental, yet indifferent. One minute we glow at the thought of getting together with our family and friends; the next we feel utterly lonely.

Every sermon should contain good news, and here is my good news for this morning. You can tip the scales towards joy and happiness, away from stress and anxiety this year.

Often the Sunday after Thanksgiving is the first Sunday of Advent. This year, we have this day, this bridge day between Thanksgiving and Advent, this buffer zone if you will. We have this opportunity to take a breath and reflect and consider how we want to spend the next four weeks. The word I would most like you for to remember from this sermon is the word "intention". You can be intentional about how this season will be for you. You may not be able to control everything, you definitely will not be able to control everything. But you may be surprised about how many things are in your control.

I have been thinking a lot this past week about Richard Turner, as we prepare to celebrate his life on Wednesday. One of my many observations about Richard is that he deliberately chose the lifestyle he wanted for himself. Richard did not like much of modern technology. He didn't have a computer, he didn't want one. I tried to talk him into trying one a few times, but he was resolute. He was happy with his life the way it was. He intentionally chose which modern conveniences he wanted and which he didn't.

The point is not whether or not technology is good or bad – I think we can all give multiple examples of both. The point is that we have a choice. We do not have to live the way other people live. Our lives will be healthier and happier when we take the time to reflect on our own lives, to think about the choices we are making, to intentionally choose how we want to live.

Consider all of the choices that present themselves over the next four weeks.

How many gifts are you buying for how many people? How much money are you spending? Are you buying things that people need? Are you buying something just to buy something? Is the buying bring joy to you? Will the gifts bring joy to the recipient? Is there anything you could do differently in terms of shopping, buying and gift-giving that would be more meaningful?

There is a heart-warming IKEA commercial in which children around the world are asked to write a letter to Santa. They write lists, they ask for extravagant gifts, they write excitedly. Then they are asked to write a letter to their parents, asking for what they most want from their parents. The letters to the parents are quite different. The children ask for time. They ask for dinner together. They ask for their parents to play games with them, kick the soccer ball with them. Finally, in the third scene the children are asked, “Which letter do you most want us to mail? The letter to Santa or the letter to your parents?” And one by one, the children say, “the letter to our parents.” I know it’s a commercial, but I suspect there is a lot of truth to it.

There are ways we can simplify our holidays and make them more meaningful without giving up the traditions we enjoy. What are we doing this season that enriches our relationships with one another and with God?

Those of you with children, be aware, too, of how much they are watching you. The things we do teach our children who we are and what our values are. I know many of our families participate in the giving tree, sometimes having the children pick the gift request off the tree and help with the shopping and wrapping. Being a part of giving for others teaches children that Christmas is about more than getting more stuff for ourselves.

There is no law - no law of the land, or law of nature - that says that you must bake dozens of cookies, send dozens of cards, attend every event to which you are invited.

What about setting aside a few days to just BE? Mark your calendar so that nothing else will fill those days. Then do what would be nourishing to you. Read a book, listen to some music, drive around and look at lights, think of one friend you'd like to be in touch with this season, one person in your life who most needs some attention, one cause to which you'd like to donate money. Be intentional about the way you spend your time and your money. Find one simple thing to do differently this year that will bring more joy and beauty into your life.

Decluttering is popular these days, largely because of the bestselling book, which I've mentioned before, [The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up](#). That book suggests that, when you're looking at your belongings and trying to decide which to get rid of and which to keep, you ask yourself this one question. You look at each book, each pair of socks, and you say, "Does it bring me joy?" You get rid of the items that don't bring you joy, you keep the ones that do.

It's not a bad way to look at the way we spend our time, the commitments and priorities and traditions we've made. It may help you decide which traditions to keep and which ones to let go of. "Does this bring me joy?" It's not selfish, even though it sounds selfish. It's not selfish because if your baking brings someone ELSE joy, you know it's bringing YOU joy too. That's the way it works.

My prayer for you as we begin this Advent season is that you may experience a feeling of joy and peace, that you find yourself drawn in to the stable, towards the manger, that you feel, as if for the first time, the awe that newborn babies give us. You'll want to be quiet, the way we are quiet when we are around sleeping children. You'll want to be calm, for that mother has just given birth.

I pray that you experience sacred times around your table, whether you are setting a table for one or for twenty. Christ is there with you.

This fall, the Plain Dealer has been running a wonderful series of articles highlighting the real life stories of Cleveland children living in poverty. The series is entitled, "A Greater Cleveland" and I commend it to you if you haven't seen it. These profiles give us an inside look at the challenges faced by many of God's children living just a few miles away.

I think of these children, the ones Jesus would have gravitated towards. I think of these children, because Jesus himself grew up in a poor family.

And I especially think of one mom featured in this series. Her name is Contessa Korper, a single mom with four children who lives in public housing. Until recently, she told the Plain Dealer, she had a small table that seated only four people. So she would let her kids sit there while she took her meals in front of the TV or over the counter.

But two years ago, during her kids' checkup with their pediatrician, the doctor asked them independently a series of questions, and Contessa was stunned to learn that all of them had said they longed for more family meals with their mom. It was such a simple request. But it broke Contessa's heart.

She immediately went furniture shopping and settled on a table made of rich, deep brown wood, with ample seating for all five of them and an occasional guest. Her credit was bad at the time, so a friend co-signed to help her finance the purchase. And she opted for insurance on the table, too. She explained that expense by saying, "Even if my house burns down, at least I know I'll have a kitchen table wherever we end up." Today she is making monthly payments on this table so her family can sit down together for dinner.

She smiles when she talks about how close she is to owning the table outright and how much quality time they now share around the table that has become a hub of activity in her home. Here, her children toil over homework, here they bow their heads in prayer before sharing a meal. They take turns saying grace.

I have often taken my table for granted. Now I realize what a blessing it is. May your table be a place of meaning and grace these next four weeks, and always.