

Jesus' Simple Love for a Complex World. Pastor Fritz Wiese
2 May 2010. Jn 13.31-35 and Col. 2.1-7

I'd like to start today by unrolling this stretch of string. Jane, would you hold one end of this and start walking until the string is taught? Take a guess as to the length of this. What do you think? If we measured right, we have 51 feet here. 51 feet, which also means 613 inches of string. 1 inch of string for each of the rules and the regulations the Pharisees sought to make sure everyone obeyed day in and day out. That's a lot of rules.

Many suggest the scribes and Pharisees added additional layers of regulations on top of these, so in Jesus' day there were thousands of regulations to negotiate. But focusing on the Torah alone, according to Maimonides' explanation, the 613 are either "positive commandments" to perform an act, or "negative commandments" to abstain from certain acts. There are 365 negative commandments, supposedly, corresponding to the number of days in a solar year, and 248 positive commandments, ascribed to the number of bones and significant organs in the human body. Either way, some people might say "that's a lot of rope to hang yourself with." A lot of rules making for a very complex and complicated relationship with God.

Do you get a sense this is why Jesus got into so much trouble? Jesus' clear focus on the simplicity of God's love collides with the Pharisees' focus on the complexities of the law. Throughout his ministry, when Jesus cures the blind, the paralyzed, or the sick and it happens to be on a sabbath, look out—the Pharisees start attacking Jesus as inappropriate and unfaithful. Because he doesn't follow the rules as they interpret, they yell, "This man is not from God." (John 19.16) Jesus just doesn't understand how they've made God's laws so difficult. He asks them: if you guys "circumcise a child on the **Sabbath** so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the **Sabbath**?"

In John 7, we hear the wonderful story of Jesus at the pool of Bethesda where he heals an invalid who has been paralyzed for 38 years—38 years! And when the Pharisees see this man pick up his mat and start walking down the street with these transformed legs moving into a new transformed future, what do they do? Do they rejoice? Do they congratulate him? Do they give glory to God? No.

They give this guy grief and tell him he's disobeying God, "for it is the Sabbath, and the law forbids you to carry your mat."

613 laws originally given as blessings for God's people were now being abused by religious leaders as a lot of complex red tape. So Jesus challenges them: "You load people down with burdens they can barely carry." (Lk 11) Woe to you, you teachers of law and Pharisees. You shut the kingdom of God in men's faces. You give a tenth of your spices . . . but you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness."

These last several weeks, our sermon series title has been "Keeping It Simple." We've tried to examine what God's Word has to say about the simple basics of relationships, time and money. Today, we consider our relationship with God—should it be very complex, or can there also be simplicity?

Now I could call 50 of you up to the microphone and each of you, I'm sure, could offer compelling reasons why God exudes complexity. At our Friday noon time Bible study on "Making Sense of Scripture," Bob Killian was making some terrific points on Genesis in relation to a TV program he saw on the nature of the universe, citing that our universe is about 13.3 billion years old, with galaxies galore. As astronomers zoom in on what appear to be dark and desolate regions of the universe, they're noticing new previously undiscovered galaxies. The intricacies of finely tuned biosphere, or an expanding universe, or even the opposite gender bespeak to a magnificently complex Triune God of Creator, Redeemer and Guide.

Yet, throughout Scripture, there are clearly moments when our relationship with God as codified in religion gets so complicated, clogged and confused, that God intervenes boldly, and says "Time out! My love for you, my expectation of you, is a lot simpler than you're making it." Let me provide some examples via a little story.

This weekend at Epiphany is confirmation, where we have 40s young men and women affirming their journey with Christ after two years of special discipleship development. Apparently, a couple of years ago, a confirmand was asking his dad if he could drive the family car when he got his driver's permit the next year. His father said he'd make a deal with his son.

"You bring your grades up from a C to a B average, study your Bible a little bit more, and get your hair cut and we'll talk about the car." After reflecting a moment, the boy decided he'd accept the offer. When the boy turned 15, his father said, "Son, regarding our car deal, I'm real proud of you. First, you brought your grades up. Secondly, I've observed that you have been studying your Bible a lot more. But son I've noticed your hair is longer than ever. The young man paused a moment then said, "You know, Dad, I've been thinking about that, and I've noticed in my studies of the Bible that Samson had long hair, John the Baptist had long hair, Moses had long hair and there's even a strong argument that Jesus had long hair. And his father replied, "Yes but did you notice they all walked everywhere they went?" (ha, ha, ha)

Well, in his studies of Scripture, I think there's something else that young man would have noticed: He would have noticed that on a frequent basis God tries to hit the re-boot button on our understanding of faith. God strives to give us simple explanations of the loving relationship we have.

For instance, one of many examples in the Old Testament is God speaking through the prophet Micah, where God challenges the complexity of the burnt offering system. God asks: Do you think I will be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousand rivers of oil? The more, the better? Do you think I want you to offer your firstborn for your transgressions? Are you trusting in all of this complexity? [Micah 6:8](#) "He has showed you, O man, what is good. What does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to **walk humbly** with your God." A vibrant faith can be pretty simple.

That confirmand, in his Bible studies, surely would have noticed in the New Testament, John's plea for simplicity, which we shared as our opening dialogue (in sanctuary). Even in the infancy of Christianity, some were trying to make the faith more complicated than it had to be. So 1 John tries to clarify: [Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.](#)"

Furthermore, that confirmand would have learned the story of Martin Luther, who started life trapped and frustrated and fearful of a very complex God in a very complicated religion. You folks remember that in Luther's day, "Most Christians believed they would go to heaven only if their good works outweighed their sinful acts. And most figured they'd fall short. So when they died, God would need to purge them of their excess sin. They called this process purgatory and thought of it as thousands of years of misery. To reduce time in purgatory, many tried to pile up good works in this lifetime by venerating relics and doing penance.

So in 1510, when Luther was asked to visit Rome on church business, he was thrilled. Even though it meant walking through the Alps in a bitter winter, it meant that in his free time, he could visit many relics, each visit winning him less years in purgatory. Martin visited the reconstructed steps of Pontius Pilate's palace — supposedly the very steps Jesus climbed on the day he was condemned. As Roman Catholic pilgrims still do today, he climbed the holy steps on his knees, saying the Lord's Prayer on each step. The pilgrim's reward for this climb: nine years less time in purgatory for each step.

Later, Luther wrote that, reaching the top, he stood up and thought with despair "Who knows if it's true?"

Because of this complexity, Luther admitted he really didn't love God, but hated him. How could God create us as imperfect beings, but then condemn us to hell because we couldn't meet his standard of perfection? But you know the story. Through God's Word, it finally dawns on Luther, that in Christ, God's love gets pretty simple. As Luther writes, "If you have faith that Christ is your Savior, you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God's heart and will, that you should see pure gracious love. He who sees God as angry does not see rightly but looks only on a curtain, as if a dark cloud had been drawn across his face." (Bainton, 50)

Unfortunately, faith does get confusing for us, even today. Luther says we are trying to look through a curtain. Or as St Paul says in Corinthians, we struggle to see through a mirror dimly.

So Jesus comes to make it simple. The complex God of infinite galaxies chooses one being, his Son, to summarize what life, what love, what God is all about. And Jesus *tries* to make it simple:

- ✘ He's a preacher with simple 3-5 minute sermons full of simple stories. The kingdom of God is like, he said, is like a mustard seed, something pretty tiny which explodes into something large and wonderful.
- ✘ Another sermon: the Good Samaritan. Loving your neighbor like yourself means attending to the needs of others wherever the road leads you, whoever they are. Pretty simple.
- ✘ Another Jesus sermon: if you're confused about what I expect of you, simply know (Matt 25), the way you treat others is the way you treat me. Pretty simple.
- ✘ Another: The Prodigal Son: if you goof up, our heavenly Father is waiting there with open arms if you're smart enough to turn around. Pretty simple.
- ✘ Another one: if you feel like you live in a Pharisee world, with a whole bunch of claustrophobic expectations put on you by peers, the media, or a twisted version of religion, Jesus says: come all to me who are heavy-laden, for my yoke is pretty easy, pretty light, pretty simple.

Let's wrap things up today with our first lesson (from Men's Renewal too). It's a pretty cool one for our confirmands and for all of us who ask, "well, what does God want me to do now?" Here is *The Message* version of Colossians 2: ⁷My counsel for you is **simple** and straightforward: Just go ahead with what you've been given. You received Christ Jesus, the Master; now live him. You're deeply rooted in him. You're well constructed upon him. You know your way around the faith. Now do what you've been taught. School's out; quit studying the subject and start living it! And let your living spill over into thanksgiving." That is terrific.

School's out. Quit studying the subject, and start living it. I think that's what was behind a conversation I had this week with one of the pastors at Southbrook I know from my neighborhood pool. He called to invite Epiphany to be a part of a ministry known as "the brotherhood." He said they have a lot of dads who've read a lot of books about how they're supposed to spend quality time with their sons to guide them along the right path. They've got more than

enough head knowledge, but now they want to hold each other accountable and help each other execute time with their sons. I said, "You sound like Colossians 2—school's out, it's time to stop studying the subject and start living it." I'll go ahead and use this as an advertisement—if you are interested in hearing more about this "Brotherhood" opportunity, give me a call. It would be pretty cool if all the dads of our 8th grade confirmands said, "you know, let's do some cool things with our sons as they move from 14 year olds to 16 year olds."

Final images of simplicity: A young man asked, out of the 613 options we have, (Matt 22) ³⁶"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" ³⁷Jesus replied: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'^[b] ³⁸This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'^[c] ⁴⁰All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." Jesus takes 613 inches and summarizes them in 2. (*Take a 2 inch piece and hold it up*).

In his last evening with his disciples, Jesus gives them a final simplistic image: he takes off his robe, kneels down, and washes their feet. You've had 613 commands. I give you a new command—that you love one another. (as I, the Lamb of God, have first love you.)

⁷My counsel for you is **simple** and straightforward: Just go ahead with what you've been given. You received Christ Jesus, the Master; now live him. You're deeply rooted in him. You're well constructed upon him. You know your way around the faith. Now do what you've been taught. School's out; quit studying the subject and start living it! And let your living spill over into thanksgiving."

Why don't we wrap up today with a simple song that says it pretty well? Would you join me? Jesus loves me.

[John 7:23](#)

Now if a child can be circumcised on the **Sabbath** so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the **Sabbath**?

But from time to time, seems God has passion for simplifying.
What is required of you?
Great Command..

Not in our creeds.
Story of conservative church. We've got to watch out. We're Pharisees.

Simple: do what you know. School is out.
Confirm the love. Southbrook brotherhood conversation.

Simple

Song: Jesus loves me. Have congregation sing.
Easy button.
Confirmands—figuring 8th graders out. Maybe a bit complex.

Footwashing: Jesus trying to make it simple for people. One symbol.

New commandment: love one another

Paul: simple

1. All the richest treasures of wisdom and knowledge are embedded in that mystery and nowhere else. And we've been shown the mystery!
2. I'm telling you this because I don't want anyone leading you off on some wild-goose chase, after other so-called mysteries, or "the Secret."

School is out. Conversation with a pastor at Southbrook.
Brotherhood. Dads investing with sons. Have enough information.
Now it's time for action.

Simple: Jesus says love by serving.

Jesus is asked: what is greatest command? We have so many.
Love God, love each other.
Jesus gives story of Good Samaritan. (My Chicago congregation)
Live your life in love of neighbor.
Prodigal Son: God is Father who grieves, but runs to greet us.

God is love—

Why don't we emphasize this in the creeds. Jesus came because of love. We are called to love

Luke 11:42 (New International Version)

⁴²"Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.

'Now tell me all the *good* things you can think of about the Pharisees.' I wrote them up on a blackboard:

The Pharisees knew their Bibles; were disciplined in prayer; fasted twice a week; gave about a third of their income to their church; were moral (very moral); many had been martyred for their faith; they attended 'church' regularly; they were evangelical/orthodox; and evangelistic (Jesus said they'd even cross the ocean – a fearful thing for Jews – to win a convert).

There was a deep silence. I asked 'Peter' sitting at the front: 'What's wrong?' He pointed to the list and said 'That's us!' 'Is it?' I responded.

'Then you've got a problem: Jesus said these sorts of people are children of the devil!'

Then we did an inductive exercise on the question: 'What's so wrong with this list of admirable qualities?' Short answer: it omits what was most important for Jesus. Whenever in the Gospels he used a prefatory statement like 'This is the greatest/most important thing of all...' none of the above were emphasized by him.

What were they? Yes, loving God, loving others, seeking first the kingdom = obeying God the King ... And, from two Gospel verses the evangelicals/orthodox have rarely noticed – Matthew 23:23, Luke 11:42 – justice/love, mercy, faith.

None of these were on the Pharisees' list. But they're the most important of all, according to Jesus. Have you noticed items like justice/love don't get into our creeds or confessions of faith or 'doctrinal statements' either 😊?

Colossians 2

¹ I want you to realize that I continue to work as hard as I know how for you, and also for the Christians over at Laodicea. Not many of you have met me face-to-face, but that doesn't make any difference. Know that I'm on your side, right alongside you. You're not in this alone. ²⁻⁴I want you woven into a tapestry of love, in touch with everything there is to know of God. Then you will have minds confident and at rest, focused on Christ, God's great mystery. All the richest treasures of wisdom and knowledge are embedded in that mystery and nowhere else. And we've been shown the mystery! I'm telling you this because I don't want anyone leading you off on some wild-goose chase, after other so-called mysteries, or "the Secret."

⁵I'm a long way off, true, and you may never lay eyes on me, but believe me, I'm on your side, right beside you. I am delighted to hear of the careful and orderly ways you conduct your affairs, and impressed with the solid substance of your faith in Christ. ⁶⁻⁷My counsel for you is simple and straightforward: Just go ahead with what you've been given. You received Christ Jesus, the Master; now

live him. You're deeply rooted in him. You're well constructed upon him. You know your way around the faith. Now do what you've been taught. School's out; quit studying the subject and start living it! And let your living spill over into thanksgiving.

(Track metaphor. Baton. Handing off—You've been given Christ. Now go out there. Do what you've been taught!