

(1 Corinthians 2:1-5 NRSV)

¹ When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom.² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.³ And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.⁴ My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power,⁵ so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

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The Uncomplicated Truth

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: I Corinthians 2:1-5

“De-clutter, de-stress your life,” reads the flyer. You can find it right on our web page. Check it out. You’ll even find the registration form, March 12 and 13 down at Craigville on the Cape. De-clutter and de-stress your life.

Is your life too cluttered and stressful? If it is, you are not alone. If it is, you’re probably not very happy about it. And, as it turns out, if it is, it’s probably in need of the message Paul gives us this morning.

Paul tells the Corinthians that he came preaching a simple, uncomplicated Gospel. He didn’t try to dazzle them with complicated rhetorical wizardry. He didn’t try to impress them with his brilliance. He didn’t try to make things into an impenetrable mystery. Paul kept it simple, because he didn’t want them to get distracted from the simple truth of Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

Almost every great religious person I know understands that at the heart, at its essence, every true religion is very simple. Mother Theresa, Mahatma Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, and Jesus himself are perfect examples. Every person I know who seems to have achieved true religious understanding appreciates and exudes an incredible simplicity.

So, for the rest of us, why do our lives get so cluttered and stressful? If you go to the retreat in Craigville in March, you may find out. In the meantime, though, I think we can make a start this morning.

Former governor Foster Furcolo tells the story of a downtown Boston cab ride he took many years ago. It was morning rush hour. The central artery and all the streets were grid-locked. In the sea of traffic, horns were blaring and drivers were swearing. There was plenty of clutter and stress. Except for one person. The governor’s cab driver. The governor remarked, “You don’t seem to be upset that the traffic’s not moving.”

“Nope,” he said, “I’m not. Why get upset. Everybody here’s getting upset, getting ulcers, for what? They can’t go anywhere.”

“But, doesn’t that frustrate you, that you can’t go anywhere?”

“Nope,” said the cabdriver. “I’m already where I want to be. I’m in my cab. All these other people, they all want to be somewhere else. Not me. I wouldn’t trade this job for anything.”

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The governor, now running late for a meeting and feeling impatient said, “Don’t you have any ambition to better yourself?”

The cabdriver answered, “Nope,” again. “I’m doing what I like. I like to drive. I like to meet people. It’s like the guy fishing at the river. He’s there every day, just fishing. This other guy comes by on his way to work, every day and sees him there, day after day. Finally, the guy on his way to work can’t stand it anymore. He says to the guy fishing, ‘That’s all you do. You just fish every day.’”

‘Yup.’

‘You ought to get a job, you know?’

‘Yuh, why’s that?’

‘Because you ought to. That’s what you’re supposed to do. It’s responsible. Plus, if you get a job and make some money, then you can do what you want to do.’

‘Well, you see,’ says the guy on the bank fishing, ‘I am doing what I want to do.’”

When the governor finally got to his office building, he looked back at the cabdriver driving away. And he thought to himself, “Here I am going to a meeting I don’t want to go to, to meet someone I don’t want to meet. I certainly can’t say that I’m doing what I want to.”¹

One way we can clutter our lives and fill them with stress is to find ourselves frantically racing about doing a lot of things that, if we are honest with ourselves, we really would rather not do, all in the service trying to get to do what we truly want to do. Of course, we can’t just stop everything and go fishing. Nor is that necessarily the answer, anyway. But how many of us can say, like the cabdriver, that we are right where we want to be, doing what we want to do? And if we can’t, it’s probably worth calling time out and taking a look to see if we’re really as trapped as we think, or, instead, if there isn’t a way to do something closer to what we really want to do.

*** Now sometimes, it’s not what we’re doing that’s the problem. There’s an old Hasidic story of the man who went to his Rabbi for help. He complained that his house was too small and too full. Everyone was tripping over the other. There was no privacy. It was definitely too cluttered and stressful.

The Rabbi told the man, “Listen, I want you to go home and bring all your animals, your cow, your goat and your chickens, I want you to bring them all into the house to live with you.”

The man was doubtful, but Rabbis, unlike ministers, can expect their congregants to do whatever they are told. The man went home and brought his cow,

¹A version of this story is told in *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*, edited by Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield, Harper SanFrancisco, 1991, pp. 215-218.

his goat and his chickens into the house. His doubts, however, proved justified. The next day the man returned to the Rabbi, “O Rabbi, what have you done to us. It is utter craziness in our house now. Your plan isn’t working.”

“Ah, let’s see,” said the Rabbi. “Go home and take the chickens out of the house. That should be the right combination. Don’t worry, God will help you.”

The next day, the man returns again, “O Rabbi, it’s still no good. The goat is smashing everything in the house. She’s turning my life into a nightmare. You have to think of something else.”

“Oh, I see,” said the Rabbi. “I think today you need to go home and take the goat out of the house. Don’t worry, God will help you.”

But the man returned the next day, too. “O Rabbi, it’s still no good. The cow has turned the house into a stable. How can you expect me to live side by side with that animal! You have to help me.”

The Rabbi answered, “You’re right, a hundred times right. Go home and take the cow out of the house.”

The next day the man returned once more. He exclaimed, “O Rabbi, thank you, a hundred times thank you. With the animals out, the house is so roomy and clean. What a pleasure it is to live there.”²

Sometimes the clutter and stress in our lives has as much to do with our state of mind as it has to do with anything else. That is, sometimes we are the problem. One way to address this source of clutter and stress is to try to get things into perspective. The Rabbi helped the man realize just how good he had it. That may be a little extreme, but I expect most of us could better appreciate how well off we are. We then may see that our minds have exaggerated the problems, and that alone has contributed a lot to the feeling of clutter and stress.

There’s one other way in which we fill our lives with clutter and stress, and it’s probably the closest to the one Paul was addressing. It may, also, be the most problematic and difficult to reverse.

A young boy sees something he wants in the local store. The rules are that the item has a price, and for that price the young boy may have it. But the boy realizes that if he just takes the item, he will still have the money in his pocket, as well as the item he stole. I remember my second grade teacher reminding our class that big time criminals started by stealing things like pencils. Even as an eight year old I was suspicious that this was a little over-dramatic. Now, many years later, I’m not so sure. Because in that simple act of stealing a pencil, or whatever the young boy took from the store, there begins the illusion that you fool the universe. You can

²A version of this story is told in *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*, edited by Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield, Harper SanFrancisco, 1991, pp. 219-220.

make a dollar go a long way by stealing. You can do a lot of things that are wrong and lie about them. And if you lie about them convincingly enough you can still look like an upstanding person.

But this fooling the universe comes at a price. One lie leads to another, and soon it requires a web of deception to maintain the duplicity. More and more complicated and stressful becomes the pattern of trying to keep from getting caught and trying to keep the stories straight. And when cracks begin to appear in the illusion one has created, it requires more deception, and maybe even sophisticated rationalization to keep it all going. And this doesn't even include the stress of living with oneself through all the fabrications.

Thankfully, most of us don't end up in this way of living, though more than a few do. But, for all of us there is the danger of wanting to make the world be something that it isn't. A simple example will do. Suppose you work for a small company, and you know that the product it produces poses a danger, not a large danger, but a danger, to a few people. You don't want to leave the company; it would be too disruptive in your life. You don't want to rock the boat for the same reasons. So, you rationalize your inaction. Maybe you say it's none of your business, that you're just an employee. Maybe you say that the danger is too small to worry about. Pretty soon you have a very cluttered idea about right and wrong. And you have this cluttered idea of right and wrong, because you're trying to make it accommodate your rather questionable behavior.

Think of the people I mentioned in the beginning of the sermon: Mother Theresa, Mahatma Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, and Jesus himself. Surely, there is no tortured logic among them, and largely, I dare say, it is because they have not required it to make their lives seem honorable or to make their theology fit debatable behavior.

Paul worried that sophisticated religious expression, that convoluted theology would and could be used to justify just about anything. Therefore he insisted on keeping it uncluttered and plain. He insisted on keeping his theology as simple as that of the Jesus, whereby he could hardly go wrong.

So, whether your life is cluttered because you are chasing after what you think you want so hard that things have become too frantic, or because of a need for a fresh perspective about how well off you actually are, or because you have tried to rationalize far too much, maybe you should de-clutter and de-stress your life. I'm willing to bet you'll be glad you did.

Thanks be to God. Amen.