

Our second text of Scripture comes from Jeremiah. We have been studying Jeremiah the last couple of weeks. We have learned that he was a prophet who lived during a time when God's people were about to be conquered by an outside force. Jeremiah saw it coming and he pleaded with God's people that their sinful behavior was the reason that God was allowing the Babylonians to conquer the residents of Jerusalem. We learned last week that one of the sins they were committing was not conducting faithful worship. Today we hear something else that concerned Jeremiah. He did not like the way that people were becoming rich on the backs of the poor. He did not like the way the ones with money were giving poor wages to those who did not have wealth. Let us hear these challenging words from the prophet Jeremiah.

Read Jeremiah 22: 13-17

Wow. This is a really hard text for us in the US to hear. This is a text which causes us to reflect on our lifestyles and our institutions.

So how do we find a fulfilling life that is also faithful to the gospel? The struggle for many of us is that we have so many competing claims about what leads to satisfaction. On the one hand, we get a message that satisfaction comes when we acquire certain things to bring comfort and convenience to our life.

We have before us the comforts of new cell phones, new computer and electronic devices, new entertainment options, faster roads, nicer vehicles. At the same time that we are being inundated with new and glitzier devices some of us are facing economic pressures of decreasing incomes and greater family stresses. We want more but we can only afford less. This pushes us to work harder and longer to try to achieve what we once thought was easily within our grasp.

Jerome Segal in his book *Graceful Simplicity* contrasts the American Dream, the dream of making it with money and status, versus the Alternative Dream, a life that is materially modest but rich in other dimensions. In the American Dream, the good life is found in the satisfaction of our desires. This good life is achieved with the goods and services that we desire. Work is the way that we create and expand what we can acquire.

When I was a kid, you were limited in what one could do on Sunday. Many stores were prohibited from being open. I remember in Columbia, SC the clothing store on Assembly Rd. that opened on Sunday and challenged the blue laws. Ultimately, most blue laws were overturned and Sundays became a day like any other.

I am one who does not believe that we Christians have a right to dictate to others how they spend their Sundays. If I or anyone wants to shop or whatever on Sunday we should be allowed to do this on Sundays. But according to a new study from DePaul University in Chicago, states that had eliminated blue laws have seen church attendance decline while drinking and drug use has increased.

According to the study's author, "people choose shopping because it provides immediate satisfaction. That satisfaction lasts for the moment it's being consumed and not much longer than that. Religious participation, on the other hand, is not immediate. Instead, it requires persistence over a period of time."

According to Segal, the Alternative Dream is one found primarily in meaningful activity and the simple pleasure of friends and family. It requires an abundance of time to do things right. The economy contributes to the good life by providing goods and services to meet core needs and offers meaningful forms of activity and economic security. Work is an opportunity to engage in our highest qualities and creativities.

That sounds great. But how does that work in the real world? According to Mary Carlomagno, it means giving up one thing of importance a month for a year. Starting in January and going through December, Mary first gave up alcohol, then shopping, elevators, newspapers, cell phones, dining out, television, taxis, coffee, cursing, chocolate, and finally multitasking.

She said that as she gave up each of these things, she was able to sit on the side and analyze how she was using these things and made adjustments to her life. She began with alcohol on January 1 because it followed, according to her, the mother of all parties on December 31st. She not only had a huge hangover but a very expensive bar tab as well.

As Mary began to remove some things from her life one month at a time, she discovered that many of these things that she craved were expensive and not good for her health. The drinking, dining out, chocolate, and coffee were behaviors that caused her to gain weight. The use of elevators and taxis slowed down her rate of exercise. The watching of television led to a sedentary lifestyle.

As she removed these things from her life she found more time to exercise, spend money for things she really needed, and enjoy time with friends. Rather than overindulging in things like alcohol, she learned to appreciate and savor her favorite drinks more as she consumed them less.

Jeremiah is very critical of God's people because they became overindulgent. He tells them that their greed will lead God to allow an outside force to defeat them. And that is what eventually occurs. The Babylonians under the leadership of King Nebuchadnezzar defeat the residents of Jerusalem and Judah and deport them off into slavery. It would be two generations before they were allowed to return.

The New Testament passage we read is the parable that Jesus tells of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The tax collector prays that he is so thankful that he is not like other people like this lowly Pharisee. But when the Pharisee prays, all he can say is "Lord, forgive me. For I am a sinner." Jesus then celebrates the humility of the Pharisee as a model of what spirituality should be like.

If we are in a place in our lives where we find fewer resources, it may be time to recognize that the pursuit of the American dream is not where we should be striving. Instead, maybe it is time we pursue an alternative dream. An alternative dream not focused on acquisition but on simplicity and faithfulness.

It may be time to look at some things in our lives that we have always valued and asking ourselves, "is this really all that important?" "Can I live without this?" "Is this behavior really life giving?" Maybe it is time we choose to give some things up and analyze its value. Maybe there are some behaviors where we are overindulging to the point that this item or this behavior is really not all that satisfying.

If we listen to the parable that Jesus tells, we don't need to make a big deal about whatever we choose to do. We don't need to go around and brag about how great we are because we are choosing to lead this great and simplistic lifestyle. Instead, we are advised to quietly go about seeking to review how we are living our life.

Maybe it is time we ask ourselves what is really important in life. Are we happy? Are we spending quality time with people important to us? Are we enjoying our behaviors? Do we need to reorder some things?

It's not easy to do an assessment of one's life. But it may be necessary. AMEN.

-Segal, Jerome, *Graceful Simplicity: Toward a Philosophy and Politics of Simple Living*, Henry Holt and Company, NY, 1999

-Carlomagno, Mary, *Give It Up: My Year of Learning to Live Better with Less*, HarperCollins, NY, 2006

-“Presbyterian Outlook,” Oct. 18, 2010, p. 8

-Text: Jeremiah 22: 13-17; Luke 18:9-14

-Given: October 24, 2010 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)