

Simple Religion

2 Kings 5:1-14; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

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There are only four Shakers left, two men and two women. They live in the one remaining Shaker community in Sabbathday Lake, Maine. All the other Shaker communities are now museums. When I was in seminary, Kelly and I visited the one in Pleasant Hill, Kentucky. At one time it was once one of the largest.

The Shakers are a religious sect, followers of Mother Ann Lee, who came to this country in 1774. They believed that everyone could find God without the aid of clergy or ecclesiastical rituals. They formed eighteen communities in this country where they lived simple, celibate lives. The men lived in one dorm, the women in another. They made their own clothes and furniture, built their own buildings, and grew their own food. Before the Civil War, they had won as many as 6,000 converts.

The Shaker movement came out of the Quakers. In fact, they there called Shaking Quakers, a mocking description of their worship services. They would become so intense in their worship, so focused on the Holy Spirit, that their bodies would begin to shake. Some would dance or sway in the Spirit, some would shout, and others would speak in tongues.

Today we know the Shakers mainly for their furniture and architecture, which are characterized by simplicity and clean lines. The motto for their furniture, their gardens, the buildings they built, and the religion they practiced is: "Beauty rests on utility." Shaker beauty is not gaudy or frilly or flashy. They found beauty in simple usefulness.

In 1848, Elder Joseph Brackett wrote the first verse of the Shaker song we sang earlier.

*'Tis the gift to be simple, 'Tis the gift to be free,
'Tis the gift to come down where you ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.*

Don't you think they were onto something? Not everything, of course. Their movement has nearly vanished because of their practice of celibacy. They had no children to bring up in their beliefs. But the simplicity part. I do think they got that right. Our Lord taught simplicity. Blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, and the pure in heart. Let your "yes" be yes, and your "no" be no. When you pray, go into your closet. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Be like the birds of the air, he said, and the lilies of the field. Simply trust. Jesus did advocate for a simple relationship with God, not a lot of bells and whistles, just an honest heart before a loving God. Simple religion.

The man named Naaman in the Old Testament was not into simplicity. He is described as a great and powerful man, so skilled in battle that the king of Syria made him commander of the army. He was a military general and likely accustomed to pomp and ceremony. There was another characteristic of Naaman. Did you notice it? He was a leper. He had the AIDS of his day, a loathsome, contagious disease that made him an outcast and meant certain death. Despite his great military accomplishments, Naaman was a man in great need.

He learned of a Hebrew prophet named Elisha. You remember Elisha, don't you? He received a double portion of the spirit of the prophet Elijah and assumed his mantle. Elisha can heal you, Naaman was told.

So Naaman went to Israel. Since he was an important political and military figure in Syria, he went to the king of Israel, not to the prophet in Israel. He took a letter from his king and extravagant gifts, gifts literally worth a fortune. The king of Israel was taken aback when he read Naaman's king's letter, thinking it was a trick by Naaman's king. Listen to these words from the king of Israel: "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

The text says that Elisha, the prophet of God, heard about Naaman. He said, "Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel."

You see the picture here, don't you? Naaman, a man of great political and military authority, accustomed to having people jump at his word, and

also a man in great need, is about to meet the prophet Elisha, who is not at all impressed with Naaman's credentials nor is he about to jump.

Here's what happened. Naaman arrived "with horses and chariots" at the house of Elisha. There was no red carpet rolled out and no delegation on hand to welcome Naaman. Now get this. Elisha didn't even go outside. He sent a messenger to tell Naaman essentially to go and take a bath, to wash himself seven times in the puny little Jordan River. I love Naaman's response. He said,

I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!

Naaman was so offended and enraged that he turned around and left with no intention of going to the Jordan River to bathe. As he was leaving, though, one of his servants approached, most likely with fear and trembling, and asked, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it?"

Now think about this. What if Elisha had commanded Naaman to lead an army into a dangerous battle? Win the battle and you will be cured. He would have done that. Or what if he had been told to wrestle a bear? He would have done that. Or what if he had been told to swim the Jordan River? He might have done that. But he wouldn't do something as simple as bathe in the Jordan seven times. Naaman wouldn't have made a very good Shaker, would he?

You know how the story ends. Naaman reconsidered, went to the Jordan River, and bathed seven times, as the prophet of God Elisha commanded. The text says, "His flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean." Naaman believed indeed that there was a prophet of God in Israel, and he worshiped the God of Elisha.

When did things get so complicated? Surely a time existed when our faith was simpler. It began with blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, and the pure of heart. Jesus said that all of Christianity can be summed up with two statements: love God with everything you have and are, and love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. On those two simple statements, he said, hangs everything else in Christianity.

Some of you know the name Will Campbell. He is an ordained Baptist minister who lives on a farm in Mt. Juliet, Tennessee. He was active in the Civil Rights Movement and has been a prolific writer. I consider his book, *Brother to a Dragonfly*, to be required reading for Baptists.

Will Campbell doesn't go to church, hasn't for a long, long time. He says that most Baptists wake on Sunday mornings and are tempted not to go to church. He says that he wakes on Sunday mornings and is tempted to go to church. But he says that he can't because the church has lost its way. The simple religion of Jesus has been replaced by an excessively complicated institution. He was trying to explain this to someone as they drove down the interstate one day. He pointed to a stack of church newsletters piled in the back seat of his car. Look through those, he said, at all the things the churches are doing and tell me, what do all those activities have to do with John 3:16?

Now in defense of the church, I would say that Will Campbell couldn't build a house in Kentucky alone. Or remodel one in Lincoln Village alone. Or provide Christian education classes for children and youth. Or teach English as a second language to 70-100 people. Or mobilize dozens of tutors to help in the schools. There are some things that we can do as a gathered community, the church, that we cannot do alone. But Will Campbell is a gadfly, a prophet, that we dare not ignore.

Simple religion. It is a gift to be simple. It is a gift to come down where we ought to be. No pretense. No religion that is gaudy or frilly or flashy. Just simple religion. That's all we need. Just honest hearts before a loving God.

Closing Prayer

Lord, that is what we want most of all. A simple, honest, real experience with you. Help us to that end. Amen.