***Flying Upside Down: A Sermon on Simplicity***

Matthew 13:44

Preached at Lawrence Park Community Church, November 25, 2018

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I’d like to share a story an old friend, Ken Medema, told me first. It goes like this.

Alice, a young woman, liked to collect stuff. She had great big pockets, and she put everything she could think of into them. And so, pretty soon Alice's pockets were full of stuff. But that didn't bother Alice. Nope.

When her pockets were full, Alice would go out and just get new clothes with bigger pockets. And then she filled those up too. Her pockets were so huge they went from her armpits down to her ankles. And she filled them deeper and fuller and with more and more stuff until it was actually hard for Alice to walk.

What sort of stuff went into Alice’s pockets? Preoccupations, mostly. Alice filled her pockets with worries wrapped in gum wrappers and grudges wrapped in old hankies. She filled her pockets with preoccupations—she was jealous of the Joneses who lived next door because they had a nice new Hybrid Rav4, and Alice as preoccupied with who would come out on top in her office’s politics. Alice’s pockets were also full of her preoccupation with Angry Birds and FB and Instagram and News and Whatsapp and Snapchat, all on her iPhone. Alice’s pockets were filled with so much preoccupation that she could hardly walk.

And then, one day, limping home from work, Alice bumped into an amazing bird, the biggest bird she had ever seen. This bird was so large Alice could sit on its back.

So Alice said, "Bird! I want to fly!"

"Sure!" said the bird. "Get on and I'll take you for a fly." So Alice got on the bird’s back and the bird began to fly and there they were in the sky and it was wonderful and it was so beautiful up there and then something happened.

The bird did a barrel roll . . . "Oh no,” said Alice, “I'm flying upside down and I'm losing all the stuff in my pockets. Oh no! Oh no!"

And by the time the flight was over all her preoccupations had dropped right straight smack-doobily-dab out of Alice's pockets and fallen to the ground.

"Well, what will I do now?" Alice thought. "Oh I'm so disappointed." But when she got up her body felt lighter. "What's this? I feel so good. I can jog and ride a bike, I can sleep and I can laugh. What's this? I feel so good. I have time to whistle a new song and to get a tan and play with my niece and even daydream!

Freed of her preoccupations, Alice lived happily ever after.

I like this story, mostly, I think, because I totally identify with Alice. She’s so busy chasing down all this important stuff that life throws at her that these preoccupations actually define her. There is nothing in Alice of her own backbone, her own personal vision, nothing of inspiring life goals. She is merely bounced from one care or concern to another without ever thinking to ask herself, “why?” or “what matters?”

I am constantly tempted to do the same. I also collect preoccupations. Actually, one really big preoccupation for me is work. I have a hard time letting go of it, to rake the leaves or paint a bedroom or visit my mother as often as I should. Now, people here are nice about it. They insist I take my vacation and study leave. But I’m a people pleaser, and I don’t like conflict, and it seems easier to just say, “sure, I’ll do that,” than draw boundaries and perhaps let some stuff go undone or leave some people wishing for more. I’m preoccupied with people pleasing. And I’m preoccupied with other things—the internet, and American politics and some difficult personal relationships, and trying to lose a bit of weight, and my complicated USA/Canada corporate taxes, and even, unbelievable, after fifty years, I’m even becoming preoccupied with the Toronto Maple Leafs.

I drag all this stuff around, every day, bouncing from one preoccupation to another, so that I hardly have time to stop and ask myself, “why?” or “what matters?”

In the Friday Update, I promised you a sermon on simplicity. Simplicity is hot right now. There are books about simplicity, magazines and blog sites dedicated to simplicity. Usually, simplicity is defined as have less stuff, a smaller house, more humble wants. That’s nice.

But this morning, the kind of simplicity I want to focus on has nothing to do with things like nicer cars or new furniture or spending too much time at Yorkdale or on Amazon.ca. The simplicity I’m thinking of today has to do, rather, with focus, with priorities, with trading random preoccupations for meaningful engagement with what really matters most to you.

So, in conclusion, a parable, briefly told and explained. One of Rome's favorite scams was tax farming. Rome hired turncoat Jews to collect Roman taxes. Those Jews could charge whatever they wanted, as log as Rome got its share. Roman soldiers provided muscle. As farmers defaulted on their growing tax-debts, the tax collectors bought up those farms for themselves, pennies on the dollar and used the soldiers to evict the former owners.

Anyway, one day, one of these tenant farmers goes out to plow a field that used to belong to him, but that has been expropriated by tax collector. Things are so bad that this farmer has to steal from the crop growing on what used to be his own land just to feed his family. On this day, though, without warning, his plow blade hits something and jumps out of the furrow. He hit a treasure box. And it is full of gold and jewels.

So next, that farmer sells everything he has to buy that field back, so that he can rightfully claim it as treasure belonging to him. He totally reorders his life for the sake of pursing the one thing that is most important. The treasure.

He sells his home. He can live with his neighbour. He sells his wife’s jewelry and the gold that came with her dowry. There is more where that came from. He sells his donkey—he won’t need it to plow now that he can afford vacations at the new Dead Sea resort. He doesn’t turn up for the synogogue potluck. That single treasure reorients every aspect of his life. Finding that single treasure forces him to fly upside down, and let go of everything that holds him back from getting what he wants most. He wants that treasure. Not for the dollars and cents of it. But for the freedom, the dignity, the chance to start over, the opportunity to give his kids a life.

Jesus calls this treasure the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus never defines the kingdom of heaven. It lives within you, he says. It is a better kingdom than the Roman Empire, with its tax farmers and soldiers. In the kingdom of heaven lilies in the field are our teachers, and least and last are first and greatest. It is a kingdom where neighbours matter and turning your cheek is a spiritual discipline. The Kingdom of Heaven is a mystery for you and I to figure out, exactly.

But we all need a guiding principle rooted in the Kingdom of Heaven’s values to bring order to our preoccupations, a guiding principle for which we’d sell everything, a guiding principle that simplifies and clarifies what we’re going to live for.

It is like Winston Churchill said, “It’s not enough to have lived. We should be determined to live for something.” Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote, “The mystery of human existence lies not in just staying alive, but in finding something to live for.” And Helen Keller said, “True happiness is not attained through self-gratification, but through fidelity to a worthy purpose.”

And me? The screen saver on my computer, for the past five years, says, simply, “Be Kind.” For me, “Be kind,” is the condensed paperback version of a long hardcover book entitled “Love Your Neighbour.” “Be kind” travels easily. I can throw “be kind,” into my suitcase or put it in my back pocket and take it with me wherever I go, whatever I do. The idea is simple. It focusses me. I try. I often fail. But I know what I’m shooting for.

For you? I don’t know. Something rooted in the values Jesus’ taught, values that Jesus collectively described as “the kingdom of heaven.” What might you live for? I don’t know, exactly. But something basic. Something simple. Making your family a safe and happy place for both children and friends? Lifting up those who have fallen down? Social justice for first nations, or immigrants, or the poor?

I don’t now. But to put your preoccupations in their proper place, decide to focus on the main thing. Maybe even try flying upside down for a while. It is that simple.