

SIMPLE GIFTS



LESSONS FROM THE AMISH

Scripture:

Micah 6:8

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

1 Corinthians 3:11

For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.



SIMPLE GIFTS

The boy on the cover of the bulletin (and in the photo above) is my grandson. His name is Jack and he lives in Maryland with his family. Here's the question: can you guess anything about the two young women standing beside him? Before I tell you their names, I have some clues.

THE GIRLS ON THE BULLETIN COVER

The girl on the left is twenty-three years old, and she's a tour-guide. Like most other girls in her community, she gets up about five a.m., dresses, goes to the barn to feed the animals, milk the cows and care for her horses. Later in the day, she would join the family for prayer and breakfast. Depending on the season, she might start the gasoline engine on her wringer washing machine to do the laundry, hanging the clothes outside on a line to dry. She would work in the kitchen garden, preparing it for planting or harvesting her own vegetables for meals. If there are other children in her family, she might also get them ready for school, including packing lunch boxes, etc. Depending on the season, she would can fruit and vegetables, making jams and

jellies, etc. She probably made the jumper and blouse that she is wearing, and probably made clothes for other children in her family. She probably had six to eight brothers and sisters. Although she is old enough, I don't think she has married.

EDUCATION AND CUSTOMS

She has completed all of her formal education. She told me that she had looked forward to completing eighth grade, so that she would be done with school. That was ten years ago. At her age she could be a teacher for other children if she wanted to. If she were a boy, she would not serve in the military. When she receives wages for driving the wagon, she does not pay into Social Security. This is not because she is a bad citizen, but because she objects to receiving government aid if she becomes disabled, or in retirement.

She does not have a computer or cell phone. It's a good guess that she sings in her church choir, and she has a strong melodic voice when she speaks. She will get medical treatment if she needs it from a medical doctor, but only if she gets very sick.

"FUN"

What does she do when she is not a tour guide? For her, work is fun, and fun is work. You won't find her at a movie, or chatting with friends on Facebook. She does not cut her hair, and she wears no jewelry or make-up. She looks forward to the day that she can ride her Morgan horse, rather than hitching him up to the wagon that pulls visitors.

On the morning Jack and I met her, she had driven a horse and buggy down West Newport Road, Highway 772, to Intercourse, Pennsylvania. She was a first class driver and tour guide, and she had made arrangements for children to bring us fresh root beer, pop corn, and zucchini bread at stops along our route. The horses she trains know a dozen oral commands including "trot," "back up," and "stop." They respond to her voice, not a whip or pulling hard on the reins. She had trained them not to be spooked by other cars on the road, and to stay calm if someone tries to tease them. And if they were frightened, she said she knew just what to do to calm them again.

Although she speaks English well and precisely, still I heard the trace of what I thought might have been a German accent mixed in with hard "R's."

By now, I hope you have concluded that the two girls are Amish, and I want you to know that she gave me permission to take her picture. Her name is Elsie, and the girl on the right is Lydia. Their home is Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

WHO ARE THE AMISH?

So who are the Amish, and why should a Presbyterian have any interest in them at all? It is because they are religious cousins to the Presbyterians.

HISTORY OF THE PROTESTANTS

Raise your hand if you have been to Lancaster, Pennsylvania or other Amish settlements.

The Amish Religion, the Mennonites, the Hutterites the Luddites, the Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Dutch Reformed are all Protestant Christians.

The two most prominent founders of the Presbyterian Church in Switzerland are John Calvin in Geneva, and Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich. Zwingli's students, who were also religious reformers, included Menno Simons and Jacob Amman who founded Christian colonies that eventually became the Amish and Mennonites in America.

OUR HISTORY IS THE SAME; OUR CUSTOMS ARE DIFFERENT

Many of the Amish live in Pennsylvania and Ohio, but they are dispersed all across our country and around the world. Because the Amish are our spiritual cousins, many of our basic Christian beliefs about the Bible are very similar. Where we differ is in our customs.

John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli established public schools and universities, involved themselves in local and national politics, and encouraged engagement in the economic and social matters of the community.

The Amish and Mennonites preferred to create their own communities where they could withdraw and live apart. They are true separatists who fled Europe or worshipped in secret, under fear of persecution, arrest and imprisonment for their aesthetic religious practices. Farming, craftsmanship, and clothing were sustaining skills.

When the Protestant Reformation broke open the religious world of sixteenth century Europe, Martin Luther led the challenge against the Roman Church. Ulrich Zwingli emerged in Zurich. Both men advocated a new Christian order. They preached the Bible in the language of the peasants, and proclaimed that the grace of God and forgiveness of sins were available freely to all, by faith alone.

THE ANABAPTISTS

From this emerged the Anabaptists – or "rebaptizers." Some of the Anabaptists became simply the Baptists, and Zwingli's students pulled

away, rejecting the Catholic practice of baptizing infants.

The movement spread and the Catholic Church and state felt threatened. Heresy was punishable by death in the time of Luther, Calvin, Menno Simons, and Jacob Amman. Baptists were put to death by the thousands. Many of the early leaders of the Reformation were dead within just a few years.

But they continued to meet in homes. Menno Simons was a Catholic priest from Holland and a prolific writer which helped unify the scattered Anabaptists. His followers called themselves the Mennonites, but he shared the leadership with many others.

Another Swiss Mennonite was Jacob Amman. He felt that the church was losing its purity, and he formed a new fellowship called the Amish.

BASIC BELIEFS

One of the core surviving beliefs of the Amish is that Christians are different from the world. And Elsie, my guide, said it was not so much basic faith that separates us, but the practice and customs of faith. What Presbyterians engage, Amish reject.

The Amish believe in true separation of church and state.

Their life is Bible centered.

Their church is voluntary, holy, adult, fulltime, caring and disciplined, and they will shun people, even their own members, whom they judge to be disobedient and willful.

They believe that peace is a way of life, and they will not go to war.

And they believe that Christians are different from the world. What some people call “nonconformity,” they call plain, simple, uncomplicated.

MAYBE THEY ARE RIGHT

People from all over the world come to see their farms, buy their furniture, toys, and quilts, and we wonder, “*Maybe they are right.*”

Is modern life made more meaningful by the affluence with which we surround ourselves, or are there lessons we can learn from people who reject the conveniences of technology, communication, modern transportation, higher education, mass transportation and even electricity? Perhaps it is a “*Gift to be Simple.*”

LESSONS FROM THE AMISH

I think there are lessons to be learned from the Amish. We don’t have to embrace everything from the plow to the buggy to learn from them. Back in my own world, I see people speeding through life spending great fortunes on everything from home furnishings to clothing to drugs to make them happy. And they are not happy. We live in a world on a collision course with consumerism. Elsie reminds me to ask, “How much is enough? Is backward so bad?” So what are the important things in life and how do we get them?

If any of us were to list the five most important things in life -- for anyone -- what would they be?

A sense of meaning.

**A feeling of personal fulfillment.
Surrounding ourselves with people who really care about us.**

Having the basic necessities of food, shelter and health.

Living with contentment and peace.

Elsie has them all.

Cheryl and I flew back to San Francisco on a jet that used radar to dodge severe weather, we used our cell phones to check in with our children, and to map our way back home from Lancaster and Strasberg, PA. I drove home at sixty miles an hour in my car. I put digital pictures on my computer, and a couple of them in the bulletin, after doing a Google search on the names, dates and spelling of Menno Simon and Jacob Amman. Yet there is a lot to learn from Elsie and Lydia. I would like them to talk to the young people of Santa Rosa about meaning, fulfillment, a caring community,

contentment and peace. Adults should hear them too.

How much is enough? Jesus Christ said that we have enough when we have ...

- meaning,
- fulfillment,
- community,
- necessities,
- peace.

THE LEGEND OF DICK WILLEMS

One of the extreme examples of the sacrifice that faith requires is the Amish story of Dick Willems, a Dutch Anabaptist in the sixteenth century. As one of the separatists he was mocked for his resistance to the Catholic Church, the secular world, and its laws.

Willems was chased by a sheriff who pursued him as a person who resisted the dominant faith. Willems crossed the ice of a frozen Netherlands' river safely; the sheriff fell into the frigid waters when the ice broke. Willems went back and helped his persecutor to safety. The sheriff promptly arrested Willems who was sent to prison and burned at the stake.

This is not a story I can verify, but it is told in a book about the Amish. He was a man committed to his church, as the Amish are, and who paid an ironic price for his kindness. Would any of us be so brave in defending the faith we believe in?

Yes, there are some lessons we can learn from the Amish.



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