

"Simple Gifts"

A Song for Journeying in the Valley

(A Reflection by Jim Emrich)

It can happen to anyone, at any time. It happened to me in a quiet morning hour, after a contemplative time, not long out of sleep and not yet busy. The tune came into me and out as a joyous whistle spontaneously. What was it? Slowly, I remembered it, as a melody in Aaron Copland's Appalachian Spring. Soon, I found the words, written by Shaker Elder Joseph Brackett a century and a half ago, titled Simple Gifts. With certainty, I knew that this song itself was a gift, that it would be a companion through the rest of my life's journey, through all joys and sorrows, successes and failures, clarity and confusion. This song would be as close and attentive as a beloved friend.

'Tis the gift to be simple
'Tis the gift to be free
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be
And when we find ourselves in the place just right
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight
When true simplicity is gained
To bow and to bend, we shant be ashamed
To turn, turn, will be our delight
'Til by turning, turning, we come round right

The music and words of Simple Gifts are wonderfully adaptable. The song can move persons of varied tastes and moods. It is appealing when played in sprightly style or stately cadence, sung by a single voice or a great chorus. It can speak to the deep rhythm of our lives. This song for life's journey emerged for me not only as a steady companion, but also as a loving critic, a prophetic voice that would not cease sounding forth. Initially, in fact, it jarred me into a painful awareness that I behaved as if I owned my own life and that "my time" actually belonged to me. As a result, I managed each day, as something I needed to make the most of. But if life is, indeed, a gracious gift, then it is, in turn, something we are called to give away with the same joy it was given to us. How startlingly different!

My adult life up to that time had been anything but simple, anything but free. I had been immersed in complexity, chained to and claimed by symbols of achievement, which I felt defined who I was in the world. Progress had to be upward, so I was climbing the long ladder to a narrow place called "success." My new companion and critic, this song Simple Gifts, was inviting me to come down, to become a person of the valley.

The Transfiguration as told by Mark challenges us to come down. When Jesus took Peter, James and John up onto a high mountain, they wanted to stay. They thought the top was a good place to pitch their tents, live forever in the moment of awe and inspiration. But Jesus led them back down into the valley, back to the ordinary stuff of living together in community. They wanted to be angels and Jesus was calling them to be profoundly human.

The truth here is that the top of the mountain might seem safe, but it tempts those who stay there into false satisfactions of vanity, into dangerous attitudes of arrogance, into corrupting illusions of power. Our choice is to be above-it-all or down-to-earth, detached from God's people or involved with them. We may see God's Glory on the mountaintop, but we are called to live in God's Glory in the valley.

With Simple Gifts we sing of the valley "of love and delight." The valley does offer that, but it is not a placid place of safety and security. It may also be "the valley of shadow of death." The song calls us to agape love, the love which is so full that at times it costs us hardship and suffering. The love of the valley is comparable to what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "costly grace", distinguished from "cheap grace," which is pretended to be a showering of blessings "without price...without cost." The song's call to "true simplicity" requires real work. And yet to "gain it" is the work of letting go of what we thought was precious so that we may see what is profoundly worthy. As so much of our life seems to be geared to grabbing hold, letting go is unfamiliar. Thus we can be drawn toward an easy, seductive, simplicity. Oliver Wendell Holmes resisted it when he said, "I don't give a fig for simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for simplicity on the other side of complexity."

After the hard work to discover true simplicity, we can indeed bow and bend without shame. This is when we can become leaders through service, placing the needs of others first. In the valley of love, our leadership is robust, not servile. It is also receptive and flexible; it bends without breaking. It is inspired by our embodied God who came down to the world to serve its struggling people. And so we turn and turn, in the faithful searching and exploring toward the God who gives life, toward the place in the valley "just right." T.S. Elliot said it this way:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time

All of us have our times on the mountaintop, times of vision and perspective. It is tempting to stay there, looking at the world from a place of detachment and apparent safety. We need those times away from and above the fray. But our call is to enter and walk in the valley of servanthood where God's world waits for our loving engagement.