

Dear Friends,

I am not a simple person. My Mum is a simple person. It used to show up during the Christmas holidays I would spend at her place. Mum's fridge at any given time might contain milk, eggs, bread, butter, cheese whiz, an onion or two, lettuce (ice berg) and French dressing. So my first morning home I would start making an omelet. The eggs were there, but where were the sun-dried tomatoes? Where were the porcini mushrooms? Where was the brie? I am not a simple person. I have painted my home in riotous colours; I am drawn to holiday destinations more exotic than Collingwood, and although I didn't intend to come out of the salon looking quite so blonde as I am at the moment (eek!), I am not one to be dictated to by nature when it comes to the colour of my hair. Certainly, I would never have made a nun or a Mennonite -- two very diverse branches of our Christian family, but each of which make a feature of simplicity -- simple, spartan cells; simple, old-fashioned living. Calvin, the founder of *our* spiritual tradition, had a more appreciative attitude toward life's fine things. He was all for industry and moderation, yet he did not count asceticism a religious virtue.

In my latest resource pack from the PCC, however, I see that we Presbyterians are now promoting what is termed "the simple Christmas." And what is even more surprising -- though I'm not a simple person -- is that I find I agree. Is there any of us who is not turned off by the way our Lord's birth has been made into the excuse for the biggest retail orgy of the year, the great high holy day of the god, Mammon? This year on November 28th, which is known as "Black Friday" in the U.S. -- the Friday after American Thanksgiving and the official start of the Christmas shopping frenzy -- a Walmart security guard lost his life because, instead of opening the store to the line of waiting shoppers at 5am, as he was scheduled to do, he opened it at 5.03. The extra three minutes of waiting pushed these avid shoppers so far over the edge that when the doors finally did open, they trampled the guy. They trampled a man *to death*, to get to the marked down DVD players. Now that is an extreme story, involving New Yorkers, involving people who, from the fact that they would get up at 5 in the morning, are already of questionable sanity in my book, people nothing like us, but it is perhaps a picture of *the end*, which is destruction, of that culture "whose god is their appetite, whose glory is in their shame, whose mind is on earthly things" (Philippians 3.19). And all of us are more a part of that culture than we like to acknowledge.

The call to keep a simple Christmas is a call to be counter-cultural. Again, certain branches of Christianity, like the Mennonites, have always made a feature of being counter-cultural, but for Presbyterians it is a new thing. Presbyterians historically have favoured a co-operative relationship with the dominant culture of our societies: the dominant culture scratched the back of the church (made room in public spaces for Christian religious practices), and the church, in turn, scratched the back of the dominant culture (emphasized good citizenship and public service). Dominant culture began losing interest in scratching the church's back in the 1960s, but most of us are just beginning to catch on. It hits home when we hear about things like Kitchener's "holiday tree" or search through stacks of "Seasons Greetings" cards in vain, to find one with a nativity picture and a Christian greeting. Nonetheless, certain parts of the "cultural Christmas" are still working for us, so we are loathed to give them up -- it's fun to get presents, it's fun to see the kids' eyes light up at the anticipation of Santa Claus. Many of these practices have their origin in the Christian celebration, after all. We give gifts at Christmas as a response to God's matchless generosity; we remember Saint Nicholas as a model of Christian giving. If someone were to suggest withdrawing altogether from the cultural celebration of Christmas, like the Jehovah's Witnesses do, we would probably think them as fascist as the political correctness police. BUT...is there a way to set limits on the cultural celebration of Christmas, a way to keep it from taking over? Is it not necessary for us, in these times when the cultural celebration has become so foreign in focus and intent from the Christian celebration, to be, in some way, counter-cultural?

When Ann Mulvale spoke to us on stewardship Sunday a year ago, she told us about getting her sons goats for Christmas. Since then, I have heard a number of you say you are giving goats from World Vision to the person on your Christmas list who has everything. What a wonderful counter-cultural thing to do! What a



positive step toward keeping a simpler Christmas! This year I will be spending Christmas with one of our young families. With excited kids in the house, and a meal to get underway for eight people, I thought it unlikely that they would also be in church for the morning service. So I was humbled at hearing that they plan to be – humbled and *impressed*, because what a statement to the kids such a decision within a family makes! Going to church on Christmas morning -- what a counter-cultural thing to do! What a positive step toward keeping Christmas simple and Christ-centred!

This year there are two very good reasons to think about how we can simplify our keeping of Christmas.

1. Canada is in a recession. And this disaster has been entirely man-made. The global economy is reaping the greed that we have been sowing for generations. We *must* learn to live differently. Many families will be receiving a lay-off notice for Christmas. And what is even worse than a family here in Guelph having to say “no” to their son’s Christmas wish for an X-box, is some worker in a refugee camp having to say “no” to a child’s request for that day’s portion of rice. When we begin to feel the pinch and pare back our charitable giving, it is the world’s poorest who suffer. It is those in the two-thirds world who would normally benefit from American generosity who will be the real victims of the sub-prime mortgage crisis. We owe it both to our neighbours and to ourselves to simplify our own celebration and to redirect what we save to where it is most needed.

2. Jesus himself was born into a poor family, and grew into a life of the greatest simplicity. *Jesus*, I’m sure, never tasted a porcini mushroom. How is it that *I* should insist on such things? God could have arranged any circumstances he liked for the birth of his son on earth, but he arranged for him to be born in a stable, to simple parents, choosing the foolish things of this world to shame the wise and the weak things, to shame the strong (I Corinthians 1.27). Jesus’ message did not reach those who had no need of a physician, those who felt themselves entitled, yet he appeared as a friend to sinners, and as the bread of life, to those with a hunger. Being “not simple” can create a barrier between us and our simple saviour. “’Tis a gift to be simple, ’tis a gift to be free.” This is the gift I wish for myself and for all of you this Christmas.

*With blessings to
you and yours
this Christmas.
Karla*

