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3/01/2018 | Monthly Topic, Lent

## Minimalism, Christianity and Lent

by Becca Ehrlich

### **On January 1, 2018, my year of no shopping began.**

Let me qualify that: My year of no shopping allows me to shop for necessities, like food and toothpaste. I'm still in graduate school, so books are necessities. And replacing things that wear out or break—necessities.

But things that aren't necessities? Sorry, cute shoes, see you next year.

Why am I doing this? In a word: minimalism.

Last December, I watched *Minimalism: A Documentary*. It changed everything I thought about how so many of us look at material possessions, success and happiness. I knew that God was calling me to live a more minimalist life.

What does minimalism mean? Here's the definition I'm working with: Focusing on what matters most and removing anything else.

Most minimalists begin by paring down their personal belongings. But it's not just about getting rid of stuff; it's about focusing on what matters.

### **Small on stuff, big on privilege**

Taking up minimalism has another effect: It sheds light on economic privilege. I am able to shed possessions only because I have had the resources to accumulate them in the first place.

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But I have found a link between my faith and my minimalism. Jesus tells us: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). And that abundant life means focusing time and energy and resources on what matters most. It means removing anything keeping us from living that full, abundant life that Jesus came to give us.

To get closer to that abundant life Jesus wants for us all, I know I needed to make some minimalist changes. My husband and I are working to shed at least half our accumulated stuff. I have renewed my commitment to writing and study, and I have taken more time for friends and family. And I have set aside time to focus on my relationship with God.

### Money matters and Jesus

Jesus talks a lot about money in the Bible. How we use our money matters to Jesus. The message we get from our commercial culture is to buy, buy, buy; spend, spend, spend. But we Christians are called to be counter-cultural—because our life's meaning is not wrapped up in material things. It is through Jesus Christ that our lives have meaning. Minimalism helps us cut through the clutter and the busy-ness to refocus on our Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and the aspects of life that truly matter.

I knew that minimizing my possessions and prioritizing my time and energy wouldn't be enough. I had to make a point of fasting from shopping.

Fasting has a long history in our faith tradition. In the Bible, people fasted for many reasons: in mourning, in seeking connection with God, and in preparation for a spiritual event.

Lent has long been a season of the church year when people fast in repentance and to focus on God.

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The Greek and Latin roots of the word repent literally mean a “change of mind” or to “turn around,” and for centuries people have chosen to fast in order to turn and return to God.

When we think of fasting, we usually think of food—but fasting can mean letting go of anything to focus more on God and the things that matter most. Lent is a good time to fast from certain types of spending, to discover how spending money can be done for the glory of God.

Fasting from some aspect of shopping or spending for the season of Lent offers an opportunity to be more deliberate about how we use the resources God gives us.

### **Discussion questions:**

1. What do you think about minimalism? What aspects of minimalism could you see yourself trying? What would an abundant life, as Jesus said, look like for you?
2. How is God calling you to think about your shopping, buying, or spending? What are some ways you could “change your mind” or “turn around” the way you think about and use money this Lent?
3. Would you consider a shopping fast for a short amount of time? Why or why not? How do you think a shopping fast could help prioritize your life and focus on what matters most?

### **Closing prayer:**

Loving God, we know that all that we are and all that we have comes from you. We know that your son Jesus came so that we could live a full life. Help us to focus on what truly matters— serving you and serving others with what you give us— so that we can have the full life you want us to have. In Jesus' name, Amen.

*Becca Ehrlich is a Lutheran pastor serving as associate Director of admissions at United Lutheran Seminary in Gettysburg and Philadelphia, Pa. She blogs about minimalism from a Christian perspective at [www.christianminimalism.com](http://www.christianminimalism.com).*

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03/01/2018 | Faith Reflections, Monthly Topic, Lent

## Just one tunic?

by Sarah Scherschligt

Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases. And he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. He said to them, 'Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money — not even an extra tunic.' (Luke 9:1-3)

I sat down at the computer to write this article but got distracted shopping online. I need a new dress to wear to a wedding later this summer.

I'm writing on faith and consumption because as a pastor and a Christian, I care about how greed and consumerism affect our spiritual health. I understand that "life abundant" and "stuff abundant" are not the same thing. I also take seriously the charge to love God's creation, and our current rate of consumption is choking the earth.

But the embarrassing truth is that I'm also writing this article on faith and consumption because the extra money will help me afford that new dress.

I want to follow Jesus, and I believe that Jesus had good reasons for sending his disciples out into the world with only one tunic. By contrast, I have seven dresses hanging in my closet and still don't have a thing to wear.

And that's a problem.

Maybe your problem isn't clothes but gadgets, vacations, furniture, golf clubs, or that irresistible piece of chocolate cake. We all know it's not good for us, but most of us have some consumptive habit we just can't break.

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Now I could hit you over the head with 47 reasons why over-consumption is bad, but you've heard them all before. And that would just make me wallow in the kind of guilt that only retail therapy can alleviate. Sometimes.

Maybe, instead, the better approach is reflecting on Jesus' directive to the disciples and imagining why going with only one tunic was good for them — and might be good for us.

### **1. It's good for your relationships with others.**

When I was in high school, I borrowed my prom dress from a friend. I only needed it for one evening and didn't have a lot of spare cash. She wasn't wearing it and had plenty of other prom dresses. It made perfect sense.

By borrowing rather than buying a dress, I got more than a dress. I got a memorable experience with a friend as we searched through her closet and goofed around together. And she got something too: She got a chance to practice generosity and to feel good about helping me out. Our friendship deepened.

One tunic instead of two? The disciples who only had one tunic had to rely on the good graces of other people. They had to ask for something to wear while they did their laundry. Their poverty and dependence were real. But their hosts got the opportunity to practice hospitality, and they all experienced the give and take of human relationships.

When we have less, we have to depend on one another to fill in the gaps. If we can lean on one another for the little things — a dress, a meal, a ride somewhere — we develop relationships that help us depend on one another through the big things too. Those disciples built relationships out of their poverty. We can too.

### **2. It's good for your relationship with yourself.**

Consumption is often driven more by lack of self-worth than by actual material need. Am I wanting a new dress or am I really wanting to cover up something else?



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There's nothing wrong with wanting to be look good, have a lovely home, or improve your golf swing. But you can probably look good, have a lovely home, and develop a decent golf swing without buying a single new thing. And if you buy clothes to cover up your own sense of ugliness, decorations to distract you from your unease in your surroundings, or golf clubs to compensate for feeling like a klutz, it's counterproductive.

One tunic instead of two? If you always wear the same few things, something other than the clothes you wear begins to define you. In the case of the disciples, it was the gospel that they wanted people to see — not the nice new suit or the stylish new sofa — the gospel, given to them to preach despite their personal inadequacies.

The accumulation of stuff easily masks who we really are and clouds our ability to shine God's love into the world. With less stuff, we discover more of ourselves to love and to offer.

### **3. It's good for your relationship with the rest of creation.**

Everything we consume has an impact on other living things. We can't help that, but we can choose to limit the extent of that impact. Most of us are so far removed from the environmental impact of our consumption that it is hard to factor the effects on the earth into our decisions. If I were to discover that my favorite plot of land was going to be bulldozed to make a cotton field so I can have another dress, I'm betting my desire for that dress would disappear.

One tunic instead of two? By only wearing one tunic the disciples were "living green," even if at that time in history over-consumption of the earth's resources wasn't on anyone's mind yet. They also had less to worry about. The disciples weren't preoccupied with taking care of their stuff, and that allowed them time to build relationships with their hosts.

The earth is our host. If we get to know and love the ground that provides our food and clothing and receives our waste, we might be less inclined to consume without care. You want to go to the mall because you're bored? Go for a walk outside instead. See what happens.

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#### 4. It's good for your relationship with God.

Throughout the Bible, sages and prophets and Jesus himself recommend fasting as a way to deepen our relationship with God. You can't fast and consume at the same time. There is something about breaking the chain of intake that allows us to tap into that great source of all being, God.

One tunic instead of two? The one tunic was a constant reminder to the disciples of their real source and ground, their mission and their message. With only one tunic, they became vulnerable not only to the graces of their hosts but to the power of God at work in their lives.

Only one tunic? It's a challenge to someone like me. If buying a new dress will really make me happy and free me from worrying about how I look so I can enjoy my family and friends, then I'm going to buy it and get on with the day. But then for the next wedding, I'm going to try to let go of the need for another dress and spend time with the people I love rather than shopping. I'd rather have an outdated tunic, a beautiful set of relationships, a healthy earth, and the deep knowledge of God's power than the other way around. Wouldn't you?

*The Rev. Sarah Scherschligt is a pastor of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

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