

This sermon was given during one of the Women's Ministries/Shepherdess meetings at the 2005 GC Session in St. Louis, Missouri. The sermon may have some portions specific to the sermon writer. If you use the sermon, edit the material to be sure it is understood that these are the sermon writer's personal experiences.

TRANSFORMED BY GRACE FOR SERVICE

By Ella Smith Simmons

Theme: God's Transforming Power

Call to Worship: #795, Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal, *The Christian Life*

Opening Song: #249, Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal, *Praise Him! Praise Him!*

Closing Song: #578, Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal, *So Send I You*

Scripture: Romans, 12th chapter

This sermon was originally given on Wednesday, July 6, 2005, during the Women's Ministries/Shepherdess Meetings at GC Session 2005 in St. Louis, Missouri.

Transformed by Grace for Service

All Dressed Up for Such a Time as This

By Ella Smith Simmons

Our scripture lesson is from Romans, the twelfth chapter. Let us read together versus one through eight, and to make the passage more personal for our purposes this morning substituting feminine gender language where the masculine gender language is used. I will read aloud from the New International Version of the Bible as you read quietly:

Therefore, I urge you, sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and prove what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will.

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober

judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a woman's gift is prophesying, let her use it in proportion to her faith. If it is serving, let her serve; if it is teaching, let her teach; if it is encouraging, let her encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let her give generously; if it is leadership, let her govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let her do it cheerfully.

We pray that the Lord will focus our thinking on these things as we proceed.

Many of you have heard of the Kentucky Derby that is held in Louisville, Kentucky during the first weekend of May each year. For those of you who are not familiar with the event I will just say that it is the most famous and most widely attended horse race in the world. It brings together people from all walks of life including movie stars, political leaders, royalty, farmers, and factory workers. Young and old come out, all hoping to pick the Derby winner or just to join in the festivities.

All have something else in common also. The Derby, which by the way is the name of a certain type of hat, is known for its pervasive parade of fancy hats and head adornments. The women particularly get caught up in the hat mania, although many men sport their fancy head gear also. If you visit Louisville during the two weeks of Derby festival, especially during the culminating weekend, you will see the most gorgeous hats and head dresses you will ever see anywhere. Louisville is my birth home and I have always enjoyed this aspect of the Derby. I like hats.

This year as I cast my gaze and admiration from one splendid head covering to the next, I was drawn to a much more serious consideration. Those heads were beautiful on the outside; but what about the inside? With what had those women filled their heads? What thoughts did they entertain? What were their purposes in life? Did their existence make a difference to the world beyond this grand display? Were they more than just eye-candy or did they add sweetness to their families, neighborhoods, towns, and nations?

Jesus came upon a grand display of foliage beauty and apparent wealth of fruit one day when, as Matthew and Mark tell us in Matthew 21:18 and Mark 11:12 He, Jesus, was hungry. As the account goes, Jesus was in search of food, something to revive and sustain Himself when He came upon this fig tree that was fully adorned, splendidly arrayed and standing there for all to see and admire. It was covered in the best head dress, the most well-formed leaves of the richest green you would ever want to see. If I had been there, although hungry, I probably would have paused to gaze upon that beautifully arrayed tree – at least for a moment to indulge in that visual feast. Surely, the Louisville ladies' hats could not compare to that fig tree.

However, just as the Lord turned my thoughts during this past Derby festival to weightier matters, those matters that are more important than appearance, Our Savior took a deeper look at that fig tree. He looked beyond the outward adornment to the inside and He was disappointed with what He saw. We can be like that tree. Although there is nothing wrong with our looking good, we have to have something inside our heads and we must be engaged in the work that is the fulfillment of our God-appointed purposes in life. Let us pray that when Jesus takes a deeper look at each of us this morning that He will find that fruit for which He is searching.

Ellen White tells us in her elaborative extension on that encounter between Jesus and the richly-adorned, but barren fig tree that there is even a second, more contemporary lesson in this

Biblical account of Jesus' hunger. She says that "He [Jesus] represented a people hungering for fruit that they ought to have had, but did not receive from an apparently flourishing fig tree [God's people – us]. The spiritual necessities were not supplied to satisfy the people whom Christ had pledged His life to save by His grace and righteousness."

Mrs. White goes on to say that "when the Lord is with the people who have knowledge and advantages in spiritual enlightenment, and when they impart that which they have received from God they are fruit-bearing branches. They receive God's rich blessing, and are producers of fruit." "As a sure result," she says, "in the hand of God and under the influence of the Holy Spirit they are mighty men [and women]. Constantly they represent before the world the great goodness of God, not only in spiritual lines, but in temporal lines as well" (MS 65, 1912).

Let me then expand a bit more specifically on Mrs. White's observation in consideration of the Gospel message as including the relief of pain and suffering and improving living conditions for every person at every place in the world. Current projection data from international sources tell us that world conditions will grow worse over the next decades. Their fifteen-year projections for years 2000 through 2015 are already proving accurate, and if Jesus should tarry for two more general conference sessions the world will be in turmoil. The National Intelligence Council projects for example that:

1. While food sources should be adequate to feed the world, the number of malnourished people will increase and many areas will experience devastating famine due to conflicts and natural disasters – Will you bear the fruit to feed these hungry people?
2. They forecast that nearly half of the world's population, more than 3 billion people, will live with water shortages and in some countries utter drought. Will you bear the fruit to water their crops, bathe them, and quench their thirsts?

3. They tell us that AIDS and other diseases will decimate the working adult populations leaving huge groups of orphaned children in many nations. Will you bear fruit that will relieve their distress?
4. Predictions are that sick, starving, fearful people will flee into the cities in droves, doubling in some cases the populations of the world's largest cities in search of health-care, food, and shelter. Will you bear the fruit that will provide for them there?
5. They suspect that criminal groups will increase the scale and scope of their activities – trafficking in narcotics, smuggling aliens, trafficking women and children, and smuggling arms, and toxic materials, and creating many humanitarian emergencies. Will you bear fruit that will meet these emergency needs and bring safety to the people?
6. Data indicate that internal conflicts will be vicious in many nations, long-lasting, and difficult to terminate. Will you bear the fruit of peace and healing for your nation?
7. They predict also that terrorism will increase world wide achieving mass casualties. Will you bear fruit that will ease the fears and bring aid to the people?

And there is much much more with the breakdown of family units and increases in intolerance and hatred. God needs us to bear fruit that is mature for these times.

Women of God's Kingdom, I am convinced that we are living in the last of days and that God is searching high and low at all stations of life for men and women who are prepared and willing to take up responsibilities of service in this doomed world, to give one final loud cry to the dying masses. God seeks to enlist an expanded band of servant leaders in His cause that are not limited in their contribution by race, ethnicity, national origin, social station, economic status, age, or gender. In fact, I believe to a great degree that those most naturally suited for this servant leadership are women.

In planning this message over the course of the past year, I sought not to use as my example Queen Esther, thinking of course that is what is typically expected. However, I am compelled to hold up Esther as our example today. The Bible tells us in her name-sake book that Esther had risen from a quiet, perhaps obscure, life to become queen of a world empire and achieve the heights of heroic action. It portrays her, according to one commentator, as a beautiful woman of clear judgment, remarkable self-control, and noble self-sacrifice.

Yes, Esther was a beautiful woman and was richly adorned no doubt, but as her story demonstrates there was much more to Esther. She possessed in head and heart the exemplary attributes of a selfless servant leader. She was intelligent, was a good listener, was a good communicator, had a pleasing personality and charisma, was sociable, was psychologically healthy, possessed a strong belief in God, had great moral strength and general courage, was secure, and held unusual sensibilities to the needs of others.

All these attributes came as gifts to Esther. The talents, characteristics and personal traits all came from God to be used in His cause. Yet, Esther, during her childhood, youth, and even early adulthood probably had no idea, no clue of her purpose for life. She could not boast as Samuel, Jeremiah, or David of having heard God's call to her while she was yet young. She was not even expected by her peers and her people to operate as a leader in service for Esther was a woman. She was not expected to speak up at any time without being spoken to for she was a woman; not to take a stand on any issue of importance for she had no political authority since she was a woman. She was privileged and not expected to even concern herself with the plight of the masses for she was a woman, meant only to be a delight for the eyes of the people and an ornament on the king's arm. Her only worth was her great beauty and splendid adornment for Esther was a woman.

There is no doubt that this woman was gorgeous and impeccably clad, but as we have noted, Esther's great worth was more than met the eye, and when the time came, when conditions in her world had reached crisis, God sent a word, His divine call, to Queen Esther. After investigating the situation from which she had been sheltered and understanding the plight of the people, through prayer and fasting Esther recognized God's call and realized her life's purpose. The Bible tells us that Esther boldly declared that she would take up the cause, that she would initiate an intervention and we know that she did so without concern for her personal comfort and safety. She was willing to give herself for others, even at personal risk.

Some have defined "calling" as a divine summons. You know when you get a summons to appear in court, you do not decline the invitation, but you just show up on time. So, Esther answered God's call, the divine summons, with an unhesitating and resolute yes, Lord. Her actions demonstrated that although she knew that while God could save His people through a variety of means, He had chosen her as His instrument for that time. Only Esther could do the job in the appointed way and she knew that.

Esther knew also that if God called her He would sustain her, in life and in death. Yet, she still had to exercise great faith, however, because as with most of us God had not revealed to her the outcome of her actions. She did not know if she would be victorious or perish in the confrontation with evil. She simply knew what God wanted her to do and that was all she needed to know. Like Gideon, Esther had begun life as the least of the least but had allowed God to transform her by His grace and to change her ordinary existence into extraordinary service for God's kingdom.

Our people – our families, our neighbors, our church members, our country people – all over this world have been targeted by Satan for annihilation and God calls once again for women

who have been prepared, women who have something under those beautiful head pieces and artistic hairdos, women who will hear His call and realize that they were brought into God's kingdom for such a time as this. Now that we have been transformed by God's grace for growth and for daily living, that is self-improvement, God wants to achieve another transformation in us – one that results in service for and to others.

God calls women who will give all to His commission to servant leadership. Through His gift of grace God calls us today to take up His cause; our church calls us to greater service to humanity; and the world calls us to care. Further, this church will not be most efficient and effective in achieving its purpose until it draws upon the full array of talents and gifts that God has placed within its body. It will not be triumphant until women everywhere are free to fulfill the purposes for which we were born.

Ladies we have a responsibility as well in this regard. We must rise up and come out, not to upset the church or the world or overthrow established structures necessarily. But we must arise from our places of privilege, emerge from our comfortable zones of labor and take up our crosses in servant leadership being willing to suffer discomfort, pain, frustration, fatigue, and in some instances face death for the cause of God in service to a challenged church and a doomed world.

Now and in the years to come the world needs servants who go beyond what it has known in the past. As the projections indicate past actions will not be sufficient for the times to come. We who are here in God's garden have been chosen to take on leadership levels of service. No matter what we have accomplished in the past, we have a much greater work to do today and in the future. Here we are at the gathering of our world church, at the General Conference session hoping to hear something from the Lord. We are all dressed up, looking the

part, but are we truly prepared for such a time as this in the world?

In Louisville and most of the southern part of the United States people are very concerned with dressing properly for the occasion. So we Christian women must be concerned also, but not in ways we have been in the past, measuring skirt lengths and color intensity. Someone has said that we should have our war clothes on, for in offering our service to a wicked world we will wrestle not with flesh and blood, but with the supernatural powers of spiritual darkness. As we go forth we must be clad in the whole armor of God. That is how I want to be dressed up this morning. I want my clothes to be hand-tailored by the Holy Spirit and I want Ephesians 6 to be my designer label. When we have that we can be adorned like Queen Esther.

You know Esther wore the finest fabrics in her long flowing skirts, but also was wrapped about with the truth. Her skirts were complimented by the most delicate and elaborate top coverings, but also she was fitted in the breastplate of righteousness. Esther wore the finest, most stylish shoes of her day and probably had a closet full of hand-crafted footwear, but more importantly her feet were shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace, and although she carried a most dainty fan in her hand, as we considered earlier she surely carried the shield of faith. Then to complete her outfits, Esther's head adornments were always elegant. Yet, over them all she wore the helmet of salvation. And while Esther must have carried exquisite handbags of the most precious stones and metals, we know she wielded the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God (Ephesians 6:14-17).

Yes, it is important to be dressed properly for the occasion. Are you dressed for the occasion? Are you wearing your Ephesians 6 designer attire as you march into the realm of greater service? It requires daily grooming, you know, and is quite costly. How then can we as ordinary women of limited means and influence achieve and maintain that standard of dress?

As I close, let's consider what Ellen White says in one of her analyses of Romans 12 (and again I will personalize the passage substituting feminine gender language for the masculine):

“Women, fallen, women, may be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that she can ‘prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. How does she prove this? By the Holy Spirit taking possession of her mind, spirit, heart, and character. Where does the proving come in?’” Ellen White says, “We are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men.” (Surely she penned this for women!)

“A real work,” she says, “is wrought by the Holy Spirit upon the human character, and its fruits are seen. Just as a good tree will bear fruit, so will the tree that is actually planted in the Lord’s garden produce good fruit unto eternal life” (MS 1a, 1890). She says an entire transformation will take place in our lives. Though expensive, it is really free! It is God’s gift to us. Let us hasten, therefore, to say with Isaiah, “I heard the voice of the Lord saying whom shall I send, and who will go [in service] for us? And we said, here I am Lord; I am dressed and ready to serve, send me.

May God bless us all as we act to fulfill our life’s purpose through service for such a time as this.

Biographical Information on the sermon Writer: Dr. Ella Louise Smith Simmons was recently elected as a Vice President of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists—the first woman to hold this position. Shortly before, she retired from her position as Provost and Vice President for Academic Administration and Tenured Professor of Education at LaSierra University, California. Throughout her career Simmons has been dedicated to service to her profession and her church. She has been married to Nord Simmons, a retired high school teacher, for 38 years. They have two adult sons, Darryl and Christopher, a teenage granddaughter, Jannette, and a two year old grandson, Evan. Simmons enjoys reading, walking, traveling, cooking, and decorating.