

Sermon: Where to Start?
Text: Matthew 6:24-34
Date: February 16, 2020
Context: WWPCCC
By: Rev. Steve Runholt

We're going to read this text twice...the first time the say Jesus preached it, only in English and in a church, from an actual pulpit, rather than outdoors on a hillside....

“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear.

Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

Now with Grace's help, we're going to read a paraphrased version that perhaps captures not just the way Jesus preached it, but the way his listeners may have heard it. (Credit for the script we'll be using goes to the writer Alyce McKenzie.)

Steve: "You cannot serve God and wealth"

Grace: Why not?

Steve: "Because no one can serve two masters. A slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other."

Grace: I don't know if I agree with that or not. It seems overstated.

Steve: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear."

Grace: Seriously? Isn't your advice a little naïve? I do need to plan ahead and know where my next meal is coming from and make sure my family is clothed.

Steve: "Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?"

Grace: Yes, I guess when you put it like that...

Steve: "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"

Grace: Yes, but . . .

Steve: "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?"

Grace: No, I guess not, but . . .

Steve: And why do you worry about clothing?

Grace: Well, because I need to be appropriately dressed for various occasions and at least try to be somewhat up to date.

Steve: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these"

Grace: Why do you keep making these nature analogies? Those are flowers. I'm a person.

Steve: "If God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, you of little faith?"

Grace: It would be nice to think so, but don't you think worry serves a useful function sometimes?

Steve: "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'"

Grace: All right. I get that you're not going to budge on the worry issue. But tell me this: what am I to do with all that mental free time I used to spend worrying?

Steve: "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well"

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Given the demographic profile of the original audience to whom Jesus preached this sermon, this is an absolutely audacious promise to make.

And I think you could perhaps hear that in the second reading.

So, audacious, but also beautiful.

If only it were that easy. If only we were goldfinches. If only we lived in a world where people put thistle seed out in their backyard feeders, specifically for us, to make sure we have enough food to help get us through the lean winter months.

If only we were calla lilies, so prized by members of the local garden club, that they devote special time and attention making sure we have just the right amount of sunlight, water and plant for our blossoms to flower every year.

If only we lived in a world without mortgages and rigged elections and the corona virus and melting glaciers.

But for better or worse, we're not finches and we're not flowers, and that is not the world we live in.

The hard truth is that there is a reason half the students on campus suffer from insomnia nowadays.

There is a reason that half the medicine cabinets in America are stocked with prescription bottles filled with Atavan and Lexipro, and Paxil and Prozac.

Life can be, and often is, a hard and unforgiving affair, and the world is full of events and trends that are more than a little bit frightening.

Indeed, nowadays it seems like if you're not at least a little bit anxious, maybe even a lot a bit anxious, then you're not paying attention.

So if we are going to take Jesus up on this invitation, if we are going to live into this promised land of worry-free living, where would we even start? What's the first step?

One possibility is by simply being honest about how hard it is to live that way, about the sheer number of things outside those doors that militate against achieving this peaceful, non-anxious state of mind.

Because it's true that that you can't achieve any kind of lasting peace by living in denial about the way the world is.

And that is just as true with regard to inner peace as it is about world peace. Denial will not save us. Sticking one's head in the sand is not a sustainable coping strategy.

So, it's important to live our lives honestly, with our eyes wide open, and our hearts willing to acknowledge that we're going to face some stiff challenges along the way, and maybe that we're experiencing some now.

But in the end this is not a self-help text.

The Sermon on the Mount is not a guide to achieving the simple happiness we feel when we're on vacation and have managed, for a brief span anyway, to leave our worries behind, us as we wiggle our toes in the sand and contemplate the turquoise blue ocean.

I believe the goal Jesus is aiming for here is not happiness or temporary tranquility.

I believe his goal here is a transformed life. His hope, his intention, is to give his listeners a different way of seeing the world. And a different way of living in it.

And the key to this transformation, the starting point, comes right at the very beginning of the passage.

“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

Every single person who heard this sermon would likely already have believed this. For the most part they were first century Jewish peasants, who freely and gladly worshiped YHWH.

But they were also folks who struggled to pay for their daily bread. The idea of serving wealth would likely never have occurred to them.

So this is not a sermon about economics, or finances, or money-based idolatry. This is a sermon about what we believe. And in whom we believe. And about an alternate view of reality.

It's an invitation to live a life of faith, to center our worldview around the belief that God is a God of abundance, the source of all wealth.

And that this same God does in fact love us more than birders love their finches and gardeners love their lilies.

Living into this belief, trusting this belief, takes a lifetime of practice. Somedays it feels as easy as falling off a log, other days it's harder than playing Widor's Toccata.

I got my first glimpse of what this life of faith looks like, my first inkling of how it might work, when I was just nineteen.

I've shared this story with a few of you before, but it's so on point I want to share it again here.

I was in my first, and only, year at a small bible college nestled deep in the Rocky Mountains in northern Montana.

One day, one of our instructors announced that he would be leading a mission trip to Haiti and Jamaica after classes ended in the spring. He noted that space would be limited so, if you wanted to go, you needed to make that known sooner rather than later.

I knew immediately that I wanted to go. In fact, I felt called to go. (The reasons for this would become clear to me years later, and they are directly related to why I am standing here in this pulpit today.)

But at the time all I knew is that I was facing a pretty big hurdle. The cost of the trip was quite prohibitive: indeed at \$1200, it was overwhelmingly prohibitive, given that I probably had about four dollars to my name at that point. Maybe less.

But I signed up. I did not fret about where the money would come from. Because I was young and did not know any better, I naively believed that if God was calling me to go -- and I did believe that -- that God would also provide the means to do so, even if I did not have the first clue as to how that might happen.

It turns out that my naïve, teen-aged belief that God would provide a way when there seemed to be no way was a prelude to biblical faith.

Because you know what? God did provide.

A couple weeks later, as the deadline loomed to make a deposit for the trip, I got a phone call from my dad. He had turned sixty-two some months back and he decided to go ahead and sign up to receive his Social Security benefits.

He went on to explain that because I was a “college student” I was eligible for a monthly stipend of \$200.

Given how broke I was at the time, that felt like winning the Powerball lottery. But even better, this stipend was backdated to his birthday and so the total that would be coming to me was...\$1200.

Since then I’ve seen these sorts of...let’s call them... providential surprises play out a number of different times, including at least twice right here, when this church received significant gifts right when we needed them, including just a month ago when we got the news about the amazingly generous gift Steve Williams left us.

As you may know, our Action Team has begun their work of discerning how best to invest and steward those moneys, so do keep them in your prayers as they continue their work.

Two final thoughts. First, I realize you can’t budget on the basis of these divine surprises. You can’t develop presumptuous or extravagant plans and then expect God to fund your wildest dreams.

But you can expect God to come good on the promise that we mean more to the Divine One than birds or flowers do.

Second I also realize that there are plenty of other things going on in the world right now to worry about beyond just how you’re going to pay your personal bills, or how the church is going to pay ours.

I suspect that this was just as true back when Jesus preached this sermon as it is today.

Which may be why he closed this section the way he did, with what seems like the perfect bookmark:

Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you.

What does that mean exactly? What does the kingdom of God look like? Just read the story of what follows and you'll see: making peace, bringing healing where there is brokenness, reconciliation where there is division, love and welcome where there is fear and exclusion, hope and faith where there is anxiety or despair.

Which is to say exactly the kinds of things the world needs right now. Which is why seeking them, and finding them, is exactly what we need right now.

Amen.