

"Don't Worry, Seek the Kingdom"

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Matthew 6:25-34

This passage comes in the midst of Jesus' most famous teaching, The Sermon on the Mount. Jesus covers a wide variety of subjects in this message - the Beatitudes, The Lord's Prayer, the relationship with between the Old Testament and his teachings, forgiveness, loving your enemy, money, not judging others, and more. Let's take a look at what he's saying in Matthew 6:25ff.

"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 strive first for 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."

Today's topic is not the most significant one we'll ever considered together. It's not world peace or protecting the environment. It's not racism, sexism, ageism or any other kind of "ism. It's not parenting, poverty or prayer. It's not salvation, heaven or hell It's not even one of the seven deadly sins. The subject is worry.

I love that church bulletin blooper that went around that said: *"Don't let worry kill you. Let the church help."* And the church can certainly help with that from time to time. But today we're going to try and help in a good way!

Worry.

Someone has said, *"Worrying is like a rocking chair, it gives you something to do, but it gets you nowhere."* -Glenn Turner

There's a Swedish Proverb that says: *"Worry often gives a small thing a big shadow."*

Someone good with words once said, *"Today is the tomorrow we worried about yesterday."* (Author Unknown)

Winston Churchill said: *"When I look back on all these worries, I remember the story of the old man who said on his deathbed that he had had a lot of trouble in his life, most of which had never happened."*

And Mahatma Gandhi spoke some words that really hit home: *"There is nothing that wastes the body like worry, and one who has any faith in God should be ashamed to worry about anything whatsoever."* (Ouch!)

Many of us, self included, feel bad about the amount of time we spend worrying. I think we instinctively know that worry saps our joy, steals our peace and worst of all it runs counter to a life of faith.

Of course, we need a little anxiety in our lives or else we'd get little

done. If you didn't worry about getting a poor grade in school you'd probably never study for a test. Many of us will show up for work tomorrow because the thought of not having a job worries us. There are some worries worth having. A little bit of anxiety is good - it gives us the energy we need to get moving. Perhaps worry is like garlic? -a little goes a long, long way; and anything beyond a little bit is too much.

Sometimes we can get almost addicted to worry. Some of us have a touch of obsessive compulsive and our minds can become like a broken record, playing the same worry over and over and over again. So Jesus' words come like music to our ears, breaking the cycle of worry by the song of faith.

"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?"

And then he offers us some help. He doesn't just tell us "Don't Worry," he tells us how to go about it.

26Look 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? 27And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

"The Cotton Patch Gospel" is a musical by Tom Key and Russell Treyz with music and lyrics written by Harry Chapin just before his death in 1981. It's based on the book The Cotton Patch Version of Matthew and John by Clarence Jordan. Jordan retells the life and teachings of Christ in a down-home, southern, backwoods style. One day there was an afternoon matinee performance and the energy in the room was a little low. When it got to the Sermon on the Mount and our passage for today, the actor who

played Jesus said, "Look at the birds of the air look at the lilies of the field." And each time in every performance before this, every time he said those words and pointed off to the side of the stage, people instantly looked in the direction he was pointing. But this afternoon, they didn't look. They didn't turn their heads at all. So he said it again - "Look at the birds of the air! look at the lilies of the field!" And still they didn't look. He tried it again and still they didn't look. With that the actor who played Jesus turned to his disciples on stage and said, "I just can't get them to look."

I wonder if God ever feels that way? I just can't get them to look." God surrounds us with such beauty, not just nature but also human creativity and compassion - constant reminders of divine wonder and love, and we walk around with our eyes fixed on the ground, self-absorbed in worry, instead of wonder. I just can't get them to look."

A. Ever since I heard that story about the Cotton Patch Gospels musical I've looked at this passage a bit differently, as if Jesus really meant it when he said, "Look at the birds of the air. Look at the lilies of the field."

A friend forwarded an article to me on the healing power of nature. A study published in January of this year (2011) included data on 280 healthy people in Japan, where visiting nature parks for therapeutic purposes has become popular. It's called "Shinrin-yoku," or "forest bathing." On one day, some people were instructed to walk through a forest or wooded area for a few hours, while others walked through a city area. On the second day, they traded places. The scientists found that being among plants produced "lower concentrations of cortisol (a hormone released when we're stressed), lower pulse rate, and lower blood pressure," among other things. A number of other studies have shown similar results. Exposure to nature promotes relaxation, reduces stress, boosts the immune system, raises concentration levels and self-esteem, restores mental clarity and increases a sense of well-being. The positive relationship between nature and health is so strong that Howard Frumkin,

director of the National Center for Environmental Health at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and Richard Louv, author of the excellent book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, conclude that "land conservation can now be viewed as a public health strategy (Frumkin & Louv, 2007). This explains why that the happiest people this time of year are skiers and ice fishermen - simply because they are the ones most out in nature, truly enjoying it. "Look at the birds of the air. Look at the lilies of the field."

B. The second directive I see in this passage to combat our worries is faith. *Vs. 30: 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?*

Jesus is telling them to utilize their faith to lessen their fears. A few weeks ago we looked at the story of Jesus calming the storm. He said something very similar on that occasion. When he sees that the disciples were fearful that the storm would do them in, he says, "Where is your faith?" Take your faith and put it to work!

Max Lucado says, *"Feed your fears and your faith will starve. Feed your faith, and your fears will."* So anything that feeds our faith will calm our fears and diminish our worries - prayer, meditation, worship, fellowship, scripture, the sacraments. "Feed your faith and your fears will starve."

C. The third thing Jesus tells us to do to come against our worries is seek God's kingdom, do God's will.

Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" 32For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

William Barclay says of this passage: *"We all know in our own lives how a great love can drive out every other concern. Such a love can inspire one's work, intensify one's study, purify one's life and dominate one's whole being. It was Jesus' conviction that worry is banished when God become the dominating power of our lives."* Seek first God's Kingdom.

D. There's one more directive Christ has for us in this passage to help us worry less and enjoy the life God has set before us and it's simply this: Live today today. Live one day at a time. Live today today. Live tomorrow tomorrow, not today. Live this day, fully alive this day.

Vs. 34 'So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today. Many of us struggle with living in the moment. Many times we live in yesterday - with yesterday's regrets, yesterday's heartache, yesterday's defeats. We don't live in today. We live in yesterday. We're not living in the moment. We're living in moments gone by - some good, some not, but all in the past tense. Other times we live in tomorrow - the worry about tomorrow, the anxiety about the future, the possible stress and turmoil of what is before us. We live the stress a day early. That's why Jesus says, "Let tomorrow's worries stay in tomorrow. Just live today. Live today today. That's why the phrase One Day at a Time is right on.

Let me close with reading this passage again - this time from The Message - a modern paraphrase by Eugene Peterson:

"If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship, it follows that you don't fuss about what's on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the birds, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, careless in the care of God. And you count far more to him than birds. "Has anyone by fussing in front of the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? All this time and money wasted on

fashion-do you think it makes that much difference? Instead of looking at the fashions, walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They never primp or shop, but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them.

"If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers-most of which are never even seen-don't you think he'll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you? What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with getting, so you can respond to God's giving. People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.

"Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.

I started out by saying that our topic today was a small one. But maybe it's not so small after all? Because it's about having faith and trust and learning to focus on God and follow Christ.

Think about it.