

First Things First (and Don't Worry)

Matthew 6:24-34

This morning's section from the Sermon on the Mount could be considered Jesus' stewardship message. It contains Jesus' most oft repeated phrase ("don't be afraid"—"don't worry") and his most oft talked-about topic (money and possessions). It's brilliant that he combines those two topics—fear and possessions—because they are usually intertwined. So the sermon title is "First Things First" (because Jesus says seek *first* the Kingdom and don't worry about other things and let them take first place). That's a good summary of what Jesus says here. I almost titled this "the sermon on the amount" since Jesus talks about money, in part; but as clever as that is, it doesn't capture the essence of Jesus' message. Because in the end it isn't really about money and possessions, but about trust, and priorities, and (as always) abiding in God's love and care.

Matthew 6:24-34

²⁴"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.

²⁵"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? 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. ³⁰But 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? ³¹Therefore 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 God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Book: *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear* (2007). In it the author talks about things like the *Mean world syndrome*—that is, if we expose ourselves too much to various media—television shows, talk radio, internet news, network or cable news, etc—it will, over time, convince us that there is nothing but danger out there—that it's a *mean world*—whether it's criminals lurking around every corner, or safety hazards for your children and grandchildren, dangerous immigrants, natural disasters about to happen, or the economy that might collapse. And the response we are supposed to have to all of this is: be very afraid. Because... it's a mean world out there. Which is not true! The vast

majority of people out there are good people, good happens all around us every day and we need to remember that.

He also talks about the *Fear-for-profit* strategy. That is, fear tactics used by advertisers to get or keep you buying certain products that, if you *don't* buy and have them, will put you in danger, or your health will decline, you will put your children at great risk, etc. The goal: buy more stuff. Either because you are endangering yourself and your family if you don't, or, because you'll be a loser if you don't. You'll be left out; because everyone else is buying it. Fear sells.

The author's point is, fear abounds in our culture. And this year, especially throughout the election process, has revealed that—and magnified it.

The Christian response to all of this is to claim the truth that our God is a God of provision and peace, who has said (through the apostle Paul in 2Timothy 1:7): “for God did not give us a spirit of fear, but rather a spirit of power, and love, and self-control.” And, of course there is Jesus, who says, “Don not worry; you don't have to be afraid” and “Abide in my love.”

We are God's people... we follow a master who says “fear not” more than anything else. Jesus' goal in calling people like us to follow him is to create an alternative community that is seeking to live by faith and trust, to become free

from the effects of a culture of fear. To form a people who live and act in power, in love, and in confidence (to paraphrase the passage I just quoted from 2Tim.).

Yet, it's easy to get pulled into the fear vortex; because cultural forces are strong. Especially when it comes to money. As the old Cabaret song goes, "Money makes the world go 'round, world go 'round..." As it always has, it seems. In some ways there is nothing new under the sun.

And this is why Jesus talked about money and possessions more than anything else, as a topic. Coupled with the fact that he said "fear not" more than anything else. Because fear causes us hold onto our possessions with white knuckles, or try to accumulate more to feel safer and more secure. And Jesus is teaching us from the Sermon on the Mount (amount!) this morning that *God our heavenly father* is our security, who provides us what we really need. So we can trust him with everything, because he knows what we need. And thus we are released to be Kingdom-seekers. We don't have to be controlled by possessions (or, as Jesus puts it, become a servant to our stuff), but we can serve God and live in a Kingdom of abundance and provision.

Yet, one of the fears that besets many of us is the fear of not having enough, of running out of material resources during our lifetime. And it needs to

be said that during this covid pandemic, with the needed and necessary social distancing measures, this isn't just a fear; for many it is a reality. Or it's a fear that it may become a reality. Yet even in the midst of economic hardship and potential loss, Jesus calls people to abide in his love and trust God to provide and care for them. We all have to overcome this fear of not having enough.

And this is not a fear that's found only in those who are poor or of limited means. In fact, it may be true that this fear is found *more often* in those who are well off. Studies reveal that the more people have, *the more anxious they become* about what they have.

One hypothesis around this is that those who have never really experienced poverty tend to be more frightened of it than those who have actually been there. Of course it depends on the person and how they are hard-wired for life, but I have found this to be generally true. Those who weathered the Great Depression of the 1930's, for example, would never go back to that by choice, but many from that generation would say that it had its positive aspects. Because in spite of people losing businesses, or homes, people felt a kinship with their neighbors. People helped each other. There was community. There was a sense that it

couldn't get any worse. And people learned that their daily needs, their daily bread, could be met and it was provided. They made it!

Years ago, I received a letter from a former parishioner, a man who loved the Lord with heart, soul, mind and strength, a veteran from the WW2 generation who grew up during the depression. He wrote a letter one year when he mailed in his pledge (he was unable to attend because of an illness). Part of his letter said this, "There is very little which I fear after those years (the depression); not that I am a fearless individual, but rather, having lost most of what I had, what else is to be lost which has value? Nothing that could not be replaced was lost." What a great line: nothing that could not be replaced was lost.

What this man suggests is that his experience helped him reassess what was and was not truly valuable, and what his needs truly are. What was valuable: his Lord, his family and the important people in his life, ministries to those in need—they were more important than having or keeping wealth for himself. Even though he had saved a lot over the years, like many of that generation.

Thomas Burton, in his book *Assent to Truth* claims that people tend to surround their lives with many things that distract from the real purpose of living. Then once we have those things, caring for and protecting those "distractions"

becomes a priority, and it causes its own kind of fear and anxiety. Because we think we actually *need* them. So the first question to ask ourselves when it comes to a fear of not having enough is: What do we really need? How much is enough?

Jesus seems to think that daily bread is enough. Having clothes to wear is enough. Letting flowers and birds teach us, is enough. Go outside, Jesus says, and you'll be going to school. There is your classroom. Our heavenly father wants us to be at peace, and not worry that our true needs will be met. "I got that covered" he says to us. Now, (Jesus says) you set your heart on Kingdom things, and right-relationship things (like I've been talking about in the Sermon on the Mount), and your real daily needs will be given too. You don't have to worry about those; spend your energy on making things right in the world. Seeking first the kingdom isn't just a "spiritual" thing, but also a "take action" thing. Micah 6:8 is a Kingdom of God verse: do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God. Those are the things that endure to eternity.

A few verses earlier in Matthew 6, Jesus says "don't store up treasures on earth that will spoil; store up treasure in heaven that will last forever." (v.19-21) It's another way of saying, seek first the Kingdom; let go of a fearful grip on *things*

and get a grip on Kingdom living first and foremost—the things that last to eternity. That is a wonderful promise attached to the calling to be Kingdom seekers. And btw, that would be a great Bible study: What is the Kingdom of God? Jesus talked about that a lot too! And the Old Testament.

In his diary Jim Elliott, martyred missionary to South America, said, “A person is no fool who gives up that which they cannot keep, in order to gain that which they cannot lose.” That’s exactly what Jesus is saying here. It’s a simple message and challenge. Trust God, seek the Kingdom. Then watch fear dissolve, because you will experience the goodness of your heavenly father.

And that is the great centerpiece of this teaching: the goodness of the Giver—that is, our Father, who is rich in every way, and generous, the one who created us, who has redeemed us in Jesus Christ, who sustains us by the power of his Holy Spirit. The one who takes care of all our needs. Jesus says your father in heaven knows exactly what you need and is more than happy to provide it—so don’t worry about all the stuff that the world worries about. Don’t chase after those things. Your Father takes care of you. You can trust him. Ps.62 again: “In God alone is my trust; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.” Things come and go; God’s goodness and love remain, when all is said and done.

To put this in stewardship terms, our stewardship begins by remembering God's graciousness toward us in Jesus Christ. Remembering his love. Remembering our salvation. Being grateful, because it all comes from God anyway. That's where stewardship begins. With gratitude, and remembering God's goodness and generosity toward us. And according to Jesus, we learn this by being a bird-watcher! Birds don't own anything. But everything is provided for them, because God, through God's amazing world, has provided all that they need (and we are more valuable to God than they are!). Jesus says we can be a flower watcher too, or literally watch the grass grow.

These are simple illustrations, but make the point that God has built provision into creation. God built abundance into creation. Creation, by nature (by God) is abundant, and provides. For everyone. So there is a reminder here of the graciousness of God—directly for sure, through Christ, spiritually—and through creation.

Think about this: where would you be today without God in your life? What difference does God make in your life? Has God been good to you? List the ways. That's where stewardship begins. And that's where we begin when we need to be freed from our fear of not having enough. It begins by remembering

that our gracious heavenly Father has always taken care of us. That we do have enough, and more!

And, the inevitable result is that we, then, can become generous like God. Remember: “Be mature, as your heavenly father is mature;” which includes becoming people through whom the grace and generosity of God flows.

Ignacy Paderewski—concert pianist, composer, diplomat and the prime minister of the Republic of Poland at the turn of the 20th century. During his touring days as a concert pianist he was asked by two Stanford students to come to campus and give a concert. He agreed to do so for a fee of \$2,000. They said, “We can raise that.” After the concert the students showed up backstage, somewhat sheepish looking, explaining to Mr. Paderewski that they had only raised \$1,600. But, they said, we would be glad to give you an IOU for the remaining \$400; we can raise it easily. He surprised them by taking the \$1,600 check and he tore it up. And he said I’ll tell you what—pay your expenses for the concert, keep 10% for efforts to help the needy in your community, and send me whatever is left. And with great gratitude, they did.

In later years Paderewski returned to Poland and became prime minister. World War 1 broke out, and in its aftermath, Europe was in desperate straits.

Paderewski was about to come back to the United States to intervene and ask President Hoover for aid and assistance in helping his starving country, Poland. But the decision had already been made by President Hoover to open up our storehouses and ship food to Poland and the rest of Europe. Paderewski made the trip to America anyway to personally thank President Hoover for the aid. And when he arrived at the White House president Hoover greeted him warmly and explained to him that he had been one of the two Stanford students who had experienced Paderewski's graciousness many years before. Hoover explained to him that his ability to freely generous was learned, in large part, from the man who modeled trust and generosity to him as a young college student.

We have all experienced graciousness and generosity during our life, at various times. Perhaps not on this great of a scale, but if we think back, we can remember our experiences and claim that God has been good to us.

Can we trust the Lord for our daily bread and other daily needs? Can we trust the Lord for our future by not worrying about it? Because, as Jesus says, tomorrow has enough worries of its own! I can almost hear Jesus saying, "Am I right? Can I get an amen!?" Phrase: don't borrow trouble from the future (same thing as saying, live in today; tomorrow has enough worries of its own). Corrie

ten Boom also has a great quote (and she earned the right to say this): “Worry does not empty tomorrow of its troubles; it empties today of its strength.”

So the invitation is to abide in the present, in today, with gratitude and trust, to strive to keep first things first: seek first the Kingdom of the eternal things, and don’t let other things, by worrying about them, take first place.

It’s true, there are things happening in our world that are worry-worthy. But we can displace worry with Kingdom action and Kingdom-seeking: right relationships, justice, mercy, and peace-making.