

Sparrows and Sunflowers and Striving

Psalm 91 Matthew 6:25-34 & 10:29-31

From the middle of the Sermon on the Mount...

Matthew 6:25-34

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 his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

34 'So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

Now skipping to a couple similar verses in chapter 10, verse 19; in preparing his followers for coming persecutions and how they can respond, Jesus says:

Matt. 10:29-31

²⁹Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

This is the word of the Lord!

I spent a few hours this week working on today's sermon from a local coffee shop in our Shoreline neighborhood, as I sometimes do. It helps me stay connected with people in the neighborhood, and keeps the sermon grounded. What I mean by that is, as I'm writing the sermon from the coffeeshop I'll look around and ask myself, "If that person came to church, would they be able to understand what I'm saying?" Jesus used everyday street language to communicate the good news to everyday people, and I want to make sure I'm communicating in a way that doesn't get in the way.

And I gotta say, this week, I had a more challenging than normal wrestling match with this text while I was reflecting on it from a place outside the church building.

When we read Biblical texts in certain locations outside of the church, the words often sound quite different from what they sound like on Sunday mornings in the comfort and protection of our sanctuaries and a service of worship. For example, imagine reading Jesus' words that precede the passage I just read, on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange; here is what precedes the 'do not worry' passage: "No one can serve two masters; for they 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.” Now, imagine saying to the people on the floor of the Stock Exchange: this is the word of the Lord! Thanks be to God?? It sounds different in that context, doesn’t it?

I mean, read *this* passage to someone who is packing up their office after losing their job: “Therefore I tell you do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink...” It reads differently in that context.

Read *this* to someone who has received a startling diagnosis, or a covid-positive test result: “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” Ok, amen to that! And yet, again, it sounds so different in that context.

Read any of this entire passage to people at the airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, who are trying to seek refuge.

We love these sayings of Jesus, and they ring true to us, and comfort us and help us, but they can also sound glib, overly simplified, and even naïve.

Now add to this, that taking these words seriously—which we are asked to do with any and all Scripture we read, of course—taking them seriously risks letting them die the death of a thousand qualifications. For example, yes, the birds of the air do not sow nor reap nor gather into barns. But they don’t pay

mortgages or college tuition either. True, the lilies of the field neither toil nor spin, but they also do not need health insurance, and have never had to apply for a job.

This is where *my* mind and heart went initially, with this text, while sitting in the coffee shop in Shoreline, with people coming and going and occasionally overhearing conversation about their kids going back to school, yet being unsure about covid; or about their work life and whether or not to make a change, move away from Seattle, or stay put and keep working at a job that is stressful and not paying as well as they like, because, what else could I do? (Note: I am not purposely eavesdropping on people; it just sometimes gets loud in coffee shops...)

What do we do with teachings like these during challenging times and amidst challenging personal situations?

It took me a while to reflect on these words and get some perspective, but it finally occurred to me to take a step back and remember the context in which Jesus spoke these words—particularly the place, and the people he was speaking to at that time.

It occurred to me, first, that Jesus did not speak these words (or any of the Sermon on the Mount) from the comfort of a worship service, or from a

classroom somewhere. These words, this teaching, comes at the center of the Sermon on the Mount which is spoken from, well, a mountainside (or more accurately, a hillside).

And therefore, because this was broadcast to an outdoor crowd, there were everyday people coming and going and gathering to listen. People like us, people not like us; rich people, poor people. Stressed out people, older people, younger people. People with children, people without children; single and married. People who hated the Roman government, and people who didn't think they were all that bad.

And add to that, Jesus lived and taught in a time when most people lived day-to-day. Not even paycheck to paycheck as we experience that, but literally day to day. They were farmers and fishermen, livestock herders and craftspeople and bakers—women and men—who took their wares and goods to the market each day, hoping to sell some of it. This was so different from how we live—we, who have the capacity to stock up and store things in our pantries and closets, who have refrigeration, and stores like Costco. And with the means to pay Costco bills!

So, Jesus *really was* telling relatively poor, simple-lifestyle, middle eastern people, “Do not worry about your life... where your food and drink will come from, what you will wear,” and so forth. That’s quite remarkable, the level of trust that is called for. To us, it might sound glib and oversimplified and even insensitive to take these words to someone who is unemployed, or struggling with their life day to day, but then it occurs to me, these are the kind of people Jesus is actually speaking to!

And to them (and to us), Jesus says, “Do not worry.” Five times. And then, later, he says, “Do not be afraid.” And in the midst of this repetition of the phrase ‘do not worry’ or the question, ‘*Why* do you worry...?’ comes what is, for me, the central question of this passage. It’s the phrase, or the question, that gets at the heart of the matter, it applies to anyone and everyone, and sets up Jesus’ encouragement to trust in God’s heart of goodness and seek first the Kingdom. It’s the question, “Can any of you, by worrying, add anything to your life?”

Think about that. Can any of us, or anyone, by worrying, add anything to our life? Now, I have known people who would answer that by saying ‘Yes, as a matter of fact I can!’ (Or think they can) You know the saying, that 90% of what we worry about never happens. And I have a friend who, in response to that,

would say, “Exactly! That just *proves* that worry works. 90% of what I worry about doesn’t happen, therefore if I *didn’t* worry about things, everything would come unraveled.”

I’m not sure it works *that* way, but I see his point.

And perhaps, if we are worriers (and by teaching this, Jesus implies that many, if not most people are worriers to some degree), if we’re honest with ourselves, we might also think that worry works; or that it will, at the very least, prevent something bad from happening. If I turn it over in my mind, just one... more... time.

But we know, as Jesus teaches us, that worry actually *doesn’t* add anything to anyone’s life, and it doesn’t prevent anything. Maybe a measure of genuine concern helps and spurs us to needed actions, and we move on. But what Jesus is saying is that worry goes beyond genuine concern. Worry magnifies things, and awfulizes things (I love that word: awfulize! Where we take something relatively small in the grand scheme of things, and, in our minds, make it much bigger and worsen than it really is). ***Worry is a misuse of the imagination.*** Worry causes us to imagine worst-case scenarios and larger-than-life bad outcomes.

So here is another way of looking at this, if we could rephrase Jesus' teaching: *What do you gain by hanging onto worry?* And then, *what do you have to lose if you let go of it?* This is the tradeoff Jesus is asking us to consider. What do you *gain* by hanging onto worry? And what do you *lose* by letting go of it? And then, what do we *gain* by letting it go?

Here is a little story/folk legend that illustrates a helpful mindset, along these lines. It originated in the far east, but each culture has its own version of it.

A farmer and his son had a beloved horse who helped the family earn a living. One day, the horse ran away and their neighbors exclaimed, "Your horse ran away, what terrible luck! This is the worst thing that could happen." The farmer replied, "Maybe so, maybe not."

A few days later, the horse returned home, leading a few wild horses back to the farm as well. The neighbors shouted out, "Your horse has returned, and brought several horses home with him. What great luck! This is the best thing that could happen." The farmer replied, "Maybe so, maybe not."

Later that week, the farmer's son was trying to break one of the horses and she threw him to the ground, breaking his leg. The neighbors cried, "Your son

broke his leg, what terrible luck! This is the worst thing that could happen.” The farmer replied, “Maybe so, maybe not.”

A few weeks later, soldiers from the national army marched through town, recruiting all boys for the army. They did not take the farmer’s son, because he had a broken leg. The neighbors shouted, “Your boy is spared, what tremendous luck! This is the best thing that could happen.” To which the farmer replied, “Maybe so, maybe not. We’ll see.”

And on it goes. You see, it isn’t what happens that is most impactful, but how our minds interpret it.

The issue isn’t genuine care and concern over important and appropriate things. The issue is what our mind does with those things, and if we hang onto them.

By saying “Do not worry” Jesus isn’t telling us never to worry, or that it’s as quick and easy as dropping all our concerns and beginning to live a worry-free life. Same as when he says “Do not fear.” It’s impossible never to have fears or worry. In fact, legitimate fear is a good thing sometimes. And we often have legitimate cause for concern. The point is, don’t live there. Don’t *remain* in a state of fear or worry. Don’t let fear or worry consume you and dictate how you think and act

and live your life. In those moments when worry and fear arise, don't let them take over or magnify things. Notice it, feel it, then redirect that energy. Strive to put yourself in a place where you can get perspective and see larger realities. Try to see and seek a bigger picture, and a big God who knows how to take care of all of creation and all of his creatures. Use your energy to seek, and live, in the spaciousness and abundance of God's kingdom—which isn't a separate place, but a here and now substantial reality of joy and peace, of love and justice, and of right relationships. And speaking of right relationships, I want to briefly say...

We need each other; we can help each other find peace and perspective. It isn't always easy on our own. Because fear and worry can be sneaky and persistent if we try to overcome them on our own! Fear and worry can set up camp in our minds sometimes if we aren't aware of it. That's why we need each other. To build awareness, and point one another to Kingdom abundance, and peace, and an awareness of God's provision, and an understanding of our great value and worth in God's eyes and heart.

We also need each other, and even the creatures need us, to *be* God's hands and feet and presence to act on God's behalf to *be the* providers of food and drink and daily needs. God provides, yes; and often God provides *through us*.

I'm reminded of this in a small way as I'm sitting outside at my house. As I watch hummingbirds and sparrows and chickadees feeding off of flowers and shrubs, they're also eating from the birdfeeders I've provided. Even the squirrels and rabbits, darn them, are provided for from the garden my daughters and I planted in spring. God feeds them too, I guess; even though I didn't intend to be *their* provider.

And we can help provide for our fellow human creatures too, whether refugees, or school teachers and students, or people grieving, or wondering about their future after something like the loss of a job. We are God's servants, and workers in God's field, acting on God's behalf to provide for those in need. And offering a larger perspective and reality, as we point to the spaciousness of God's kingdom.

Because it does no good to just tell people "Don't worry," or even ask, "Can you add anything to your life by worrying?" It is good and helpful to take time to reflect on that for *ourselves* throughout our days and years. But Jesus, brilliantly, doesn't just wag a finger and say "Stop worrying!" He draws our attention to more substantial realities. He wants us to see a bigger picture, paradoxically, by seeing the smaller things, like birds and flowers.

He says, in effect, go outside. Let God's creation teach you. Let *God* teach you through creation. Do some bird watching; meditate on some flowers, and let it reveal to you that God takes care of our basic needs. So we can then focus our attention and energy on the bigger picture of life.

And as part of our bird-watching, Jesus tells us that *God is aware of every bird, and that they get fed, and are counted*. I have a hard enough time comprehending that God knows and loves and pays attention to each of the 8 billion *people* who live on our planet, but the birds too? C'mon. That blows my mind. And... it's incredible. Twice Jesus tells us that we are of more value than the birds. Well, I'm glad to hear that! But think about it...

If our heavenly Father is that aware of *common* sparrows, how much more is he aware of *uncommon* you, unique you, valuable you. So even people desperate to find shelter, or applying for unemployment, or new employment, who are at the doctor's office, or preparing for school to start, can be aware of God's awareness of them, and take heart. Anyone and everyone can be aware of God's loving and compassionate gaze at his beloved children, and of God providing for their basic needs, and become glad and encouraged.

His Eye Is On the Sparrow