

## Setting Priorities Matthew 6:25-34

*Fifth Sunday in Lent/ 7<sup>th</sup> April 2019*

It's so easy for us to be pulled in ten thousand directions. There's much that distracts and diverts us from the things that matter most. And we worry. About the present and the future. About paying the mortgage, making car payments, buying groceries, and saving enough for college tuition. About having enough for retirement. About our health. We worry for our loved ones, our children, grandchildren, our parents. We worry about our nation, and the state of the world. Along with countless other things that make us restless, and anxious, and keep us awake at night. In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus invites us to put things into perspective. He calls us to set priorities. There's only one thing to strive after, *first*, then everything else finds its place.

But we don't stop worrying simply by being told, "Don't worry." We can't talk ourselves into stopping. And when we hear someone say to us, "Don't worry about it" or "Stop your worrying," well, that just raises our hackles and increases our level of frustration. So, how do you feel when you hear Jesus saying to you, saying to us, "Do not worry about your life"? On the one hand, we might think or feel: Jesus as Lord of life knows more than I do, so I should probably do what he says. On the other way, it's easy to fall into guilt and self-judgment because, depending upon one's temperament, we do worry—and maybe worry a lot—and might feel, therefore, that we're poor Jesus-followers.

It doesn't help that Jesus starts talking about birds and wildflowers. Sure, look at the birds, look at the lilies; yes, but look at the bills!

Jesus isn't suggesting that human beings are like birds or lilies. Jesus is using a common rhetorical device used by rabbis called "light and heavy."<sup>1</sup> If the lesser is true, then the greater must be even more true, more important, more significant. "Compared with human beings, birds are insignificant creatures and lilies are trifling weeds ("the grass of the field"). If God cares so lavishly for inconsequential creatures, how much more will God provide for human beings."<sup>2</sup>

And so Jesus calls us to look—really look at the birds. And consider—really ponder the lilies of the field. These are very strong verbs in Greek. Look. Consider. Enter into it. Bring yourself into the world of nature. Become fascinated by it, learn from it, and then consider how much more God loves and cares and provides for you—for what you are called to do in the world, for the work that is placed before you. You're not called to be a bird—although some days you might really wish you were a bird. And you're not a wildflower—although you might want to be, without a care in the world, just basking in the sun. You have a different calling. You have a different task. We need to put our focus elsewhere.

As we have seen in this series on Matthew 5-7, one of the major themes running through the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' concern for the integrity of the human heart; it's a steady current that runs through the entire sermon. We saw this two weeks ago in our exploration of Jesus' call to [wholeness, not perfection](#). Jesus summons us to be whole, even as God is whole. We also saw that Jesus, as a teacher of wisdom and physician of the soul, is a kind of cardiologist: he wants healthy hearts for us. More than an organ that pumps blood or the seat of emotions, the heart was understood as the totality of one's self, the source of

thought, emotion, and will or action. Jesus understood the pain and destruction caused when hearts are divided, when we are at war with ourselves, or when our outer life is not aligned with our interior life. Jesus came to heal divided, broken hearts, to lead us toward wholeness, toward a life that flourishes in the Kingdom. “Flourishing are the pure in heart,” Jesus said, “because they will see God” (Mt. 5:8).

Our text this morning is the culmination of Jesus’ teaching, everything that comes prior in chapter 6: teaching on how to pray (Mt. 6:7), praying for the God’s kingdom to come here in us, among us (Mt.6:9-13), his teaching on fasting (Mt. 6:16-18), the treasures of the heart (Mt. 6:19-21), having a good eye or a bad eye (Mt. 6:22-23), and warning against the dangers of serving two masters, God and wealth (Mt. 6:24). Then comes, “Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life...” (Mt. 6:25).

So, first, Jesus tells us not to worry. In Greek, *merimnate*, from the *merimnao*, meaning “concern” or “anxiety.” We find the same Greek word elsewhere in scripture. Peter says, “Cast all your anxiety on God, because God cares for you” (1 Peter 5:6) or Paul writes to the Philippian church, “Do not worry about anything...” (Phil. 4:6). This word is also related to another Greek word, *merizo*, meaning “to divide,” or “to draw in different directions,” or “to distract,” or “to have anxious care.” It’s the word Jesus uses when he says to Martha that she is “distracted about many things” (Lk. 10:41), or, in Matthew, in the parable of the sower and the seed, the “distractions” or “cares of the world”—the things we worry about—prevent the seed from taking root and growing (Mt. 13:22).

Jesus isn’t just saying “stop worrying,” as if we can turn it off by an act of will. Worry and anxiety have their origins, in part, in the many things that divide our hearts and distract our attentions. Anxiety can be a symptom of double-mindedness, a divided soul, a divided heart. However, Jesus summons us to wholeness, to singularity of purpose. And in love, Jesus commands us to turn our focus away from the things that worry us and redirect our focus, our vision, our attention toward what the heart desires. He commands us to reorient our hearts and strive first for the kingdom of God. Or, because we’re talking about the life of the heart here, Jesus wants us to *desire* the kingdom of God. He invites us to long after the kingdom *and* God’s righteousness, *first*. In a Communion Discourse, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) once prayed, “Father in heaven, longing is your gift.”<sup>3</sup> We need to pay attention to what our hearts desire, what we long for.

“First” here doesn’t refer to chronology, but in terms of emphasis, priority, aim, goal, dedication.<sup>4</sup> *This*—kingdom and righteousness—is our vision for being in the world as Jesus’ followers.

This is what we were created to crave for, this is what the human heart truly desires, it’s what we hunger for: God’s kingdom, God’s realm, God’s way of life and love and redemption and justice and wholeness and healing.

This is God’s righteousness—one of the major themes running through the Sermon on the Mount—which refers to the quality of life found in covenantal relationship with God, when our lives (all that we are, heart, soul, mind, strength) are aligned with God’s desire for us and all God’s people, within us and within the world, and what God desires is justice, wholeness, human flourishing. That’s righteousness. Did not Jesus say in the Beatitudes, “Flourishing are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, because they will be filled” (Mt. 5:6)?

And so, Jesus gives us this table of bread and wine to remind us, but not merely to remind us, he invites us to enter in and experience our hunger and our thirst for righteousness, for God's realm, a hunger for the kingdom, a thirst for wholeness and justice, for the things that make for life, to hunger and thirst after, desire for, strive after God's presence.

Casting care and worry and anxiety aside, with singular devotion, we turn our hearts toward God and lift our hearts to the Source of everything we need for life. "Flourishing are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, because they will be filled." Filled, indeed.

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<sup>1</sup> In Roman rhetoric, it is called *a minori ad maius*, from the lesser to the greater.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 75.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the title of Kierkegaard's devotional classic, *The Purity of Heart is To Will One Thing*.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 249.