

## SERMON – “FIRST THINGS FIRST” – MAY 25, 2008

Jesus advises us not to worry about tomorrow but - What happens the day after tomorrow? I don' t mean on Tuesday-or maybe I do. On Tuesday, maybe gas is going to shoot up to 5 dollars a gallon. Maybe on Tuesday there will be another earthquake, another tornado, another cyclone. Or one of those mixed blessings – the letter you've been hoping for: “ Congratulations on your acceptance to this great school! Classes begin . August 8th. Registration is Tuesday, the day after tomorrow. The semester' s tuition is due the day after tomorrow as well. Have a nice day!”

The day after tomorrow. Maybe some of us worry about what happens the day after tomorrow. We agonize and lose sleep and fret. Jesus says not to worry about it. Consider the lilies of the field, the birds of the air.

They' re not worried.

Well, sure the flowers and birds aren' t worried. They don' t have to figure out how to pay for college without going into massive debt. Flowers don' t have to worry about what to wear to keep grades up for scholarships. Tulips don' t have to buy gas for their car. Sparrows don' t pay over three dollars a gallon for milk! The grass doesn' t have to take the keys away because grandma shouldn' t be driving any more.

Somebody said – This must have been said by a single guy with no kids and no home. Did Jesus know about the burden of our anxiety? The man who for all intents and purposes didn' t have a mortgage, didn' t have a 9 to 5 job,- he was young and healthy - didn' t lay awake nights wondering if his kids were safe in their dorm rooms instead of out partying – he wasn' t reading or hearing the news every day.

No. It was so much easier for him. After all, The only things that Jesus had to worry about was fulfilling God' s great plan of love and grace. Jesus only had to worry about saving all of humanity. There were those threats to his life, but if we follow the order of scripture – those started well after this sermon on the mount.

We can't buy that though – it wasn't a naïve, irresponsible Jesus who said these words. He knew. He knew what it is like to worry and be anxious. He knew what could happen the day after tomorrow. This is the same Jesus who wept over the city of Jerusalem yearning for it to know the ways of peace and not destroy itself. These words are not simply a chorus of the old song, “Don't worry, Be Happy” but are meant to get our lives into perspective – God's perspective. The key is that one line: Strive for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well!

First things first!

You heard the scripture from your pew bibles – NRSV – I want to read to you another version – Eugene Peterson's modern paraphrase called The Message:

*You can't worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you'll end up hating the other. Adoration of one feeds contempt for the other. You can't worship God and Money both!*

*25 "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. 26 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. 27 "Has anyone by fussing in front of the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? 28 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, 29 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. 30*

*"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?"*

God does not call us to live in anxiety. God calls us to live faithfully. And when we live faithfully, God takes care of the rest.

I am the first to admit that it's not easy. Anxiety seems to be

second nature. We can have anxiety over our health. Our job. Our retirement. Our children.

But God has a different way for us. Jim Wallis, an American evangelical and director of Sojourners, said it best. "I refuse to live my life at Threat Level Orange."

So what do we do?

Again I hear the words of scripture from Peterson.

*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. 32 People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. 33 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. 34 "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."*

First things first: Pay attention to God and the rest will take care of itself.

Are we prepared to live our lives like that? If we do, I think we will find that it's OK. Things will work out. But the first step is to know God and trust God. Steep our lives in a sense of who God is and what God is saying. Remember the call to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God.

Remember the concluding words of a Statement of Faith in the back of our hymnal:

*In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.*

That's what we are about as God's people. And that is who we are. Relax. Don't be anxious. It's in God's hands.

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Today's reading is full of richness and vitality. We begin with Jesus' instructions about serving money or God, and not both. Next, we see a vivid picture of how God provides for plants, animals, and (by extension) humanity. And, finally, Jesus puts a bow on this teaching by reminding us that we shouldn't worry. I have only two words to say about that. Yeah, right.

Between student loans, a mortgage, the prospect of putting two kids through college and eventually retiring, I just don't think it's a good idea to sit back and relax, trusting that God will somehow fulfill all my needs like those birds and lilies Jesus talks about. Almost every week I receive at least one call from someone who hasn't planned for the circumstances of life, and now they find themselves behind on the electric bill, on the rent, or with bare cupboards. Almost to a person they tell me, I never thought I would have to ask for help. Things just came up and now I don't have enough money.

Our experiences tell us that planning for the future is important. And I wouldn't be doing anyone a favor by telling you to stop working and sell everything you own to rely fully on God. So, What is Jesus saying in these verses?

Maybe a story will help us understand.

One day a fisherman was lying on a beautiful beach, with his fishing pole propped up in the sand and his solitary line cast out into the sparkling blue surf. He was enjoying the warmth of the afternoon sun and the prospect of catching a fish.

About that time, a businessman came walking down the beach, trying to relieve some of the stress of his workday. He noticed the fisherman sitting on the beach and decided to find out why this fisherman was fishing instead of working harder to make a living for himself and his family.

"You aren't going to catch many fish that way," said the businessman to the fisherman, "you should be working rather than lying on the beach!"

The fisherman looked up at the businessman, smiled and replied, "And what will my reward be?" "Well, you can get bigger nets and catch more fish!" was the businessman's answer.

"And then what will my reward be?" asked the fisherman, still smiling. The businessman replied, "You will make money and you'll be able to buy a boat, which will then result in larger catches of fish!"

"And then what will my reward be?" asked the fisherman again. The

businessman was beginning to get a little irritated with the fisherman's questions. "You can buy a bigger boat, and hire some people to work for you!" he said.

"And then what will my reward be?" repeated the fisherman. The businessman was getting angry. "Don't you understand? You can build up a fleet of fishing boats, sail all over the world, and let all your employees catch fish for you!

Once again the fisherman asked, "And then what will my reward be?" The businessman was red with rage and shouted at the fisherman, "Don't you understand that you can become so rich that you will never have to work for your living again! You can spend all the rest of your days sitting on this beach, looking at the sunset. You won't have a care in the world!"

The fisherman, still smiling, looked up and said, "And what do you think I'm doing right now?"

Jesus' comments about relying on God to provide for our needs are not directed at people who have the luxury of not working. These comments about trusting in God are directed at people like you and me, people who have to work to pay the bills. Jesus calls us to understand that our lives aren't based on what we do for a living; they are based on a relationship with God.

The hymn reminds us: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you." And, "The Message" makes the point even more clearly. Here those words again:

*"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."*

First things first.

- > There's this great TV show on USA about a very neurotic, but very
- > intelligent, detective named Adrian Monk. In one of the shows, Monk says
- > wistfully, "I don't know how NOT to worry!"

Is that resonating with you? Those worry thoughts:

People depend on me! People expect me to be  $x$  or  $y$  - fill in the blank!

I'd like to stop worrying, and I will as soon as this happens or that happens. And this, this, this. Tomorrow things will settle down, and then I will stop being anxious.

What about the day after tomorrow-Tuesday, in fact?

What if the bottom falls out of your world Tuesday?

Will all that worrying give you a greater ability to deal with the earthquakes and the tornadoes and high tuition costs and children who leave home and parents who have to be put in the nursing home and what are you going to do with the rest of your life?

Jesus doesn't promise to solve our problems. But he does promise to be with us through them. And he gives us a precious gift of perspective.

Consider those lilies. Look at the birds of the air. Who of you by worrying have added a single hour to your life? Didn't Jesus know us so well?

We can look at our parents, our grandparents and see how they survived the day after tomorrow. And for Jesus, at least, that day after tomorrow for him was resurrection Sunday. What a day in the Kingdom THAT was.

You will make it through the day after tomorrow as well. No matter what that day looks like. You are not alone today. You are not alone tomorrow. God is even with you the day after tomorrow.

"Don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow." That I can do. Jesus knows we're going to worry about tomorrow. That's natural. But I can work toward not getting so worked up about tomorrow that I miss out on today.

God doesn't want us tying ourselves up in knots over the possibilities of what lies ahead. Being concerned, being prepared, and planning for the future are all good things. The problem happens when those plans take control of our lives and when fulfilling those hopes and dreams takes on more importance than following the God-path in our lives.

There is a difference between paying careful attention to what lies ahead and worry. The extreme condition is Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome or anxiety

disorder. When worry dominates, how easy it is for concerns raised in simple planning to spin out of control into full-blown anxiety. What derails us are thoughts of "what if?", which either never happen or are completely out of our control. What sets us back on the rails is to focus on what we can do within reason.

Birds can't sow, reap, or gather into barns, but they can build nests, catch insects, and pluck berries off bushes. Lilies can't toil or spin, but they can bud and bloom and photosynthesize.

We do what we can and trust God to help us with the rest.

That's the thread that ties these teachings together. Jesus says we must choose a master, God or money. Jesus challenges us to trust in God to provide. And Jesus urges us not to worry about tomorrow. The problem isn't money, or work, or worry; the problem is when those kick God out of the top-priority spot in our lives.

First things first!

Worry seems to drive our economy at times.

Over against our cultural worry is Jesus' words. "Don't worry about what you will wear, or what you will eat." Jesus offers a vision of peace not brought on by stimulus checks, political promises, or cure-all remedies. Jesus gives us a vision of a kingdom, His Kingdom. Seek first God's righteousness and the Kingdom is not far away. Stop worrying.

Let's help one another stay focused on the bigger picture. All of these worries and anxieties of life will pass. At the end of the day, no matter how worried we are about the trials of life, we can rely on God's presence.

It's not that we won't worry, but those concerns don't have to dominate our lives. Each day we have a choice. We can choose to focus on the uncertainties of life and let worry take over our lives. Or, we can choose to live our lives steeped in God-reality, God-initiative, and God-provisions. In reality each day will likely be a combination of the two, not the cut-and-dried, no-middle-ground positions that Matthew portrays. Some days worry will win out. Some times reliance on God's

presence will take the day. But, we don't need to get stopped by worrying about being perfect.

> I'd like to end with a poem by Thom Shuman called  
"Alterations, No Charge."

*> Last night, I hung up my worries in the closet,  
hoping the wrinkles would smooth  
out by the next day;  
I put my fears into the laundry, so they would be clean enough  
to wear again this week;  
I made sure that pebble called stress was still in my shoe,  
where it has worn a hole into the heel.  
but this morning, when I opened the closet,  
I found a whole new outfit,  
woven out of Easter lilies and resurrection's sweet grass  
and sandals made out of sparrow's feathers.  
turning, I found you standing there, a tape measure around your neck,  
chalk in your hand, saying with a smile, 'try them on . . .so we can see  
if any alterations are needed'*

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