

Got Fear?

A sermon preached by

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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 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.

A few years ago, I was talking with my brother and he was remembering the birth of his first son, now more than 30 years ago. He said that when he and his wife got home from the hospital he had a moment of overwhelming anxiety because -- my usually self-confident brother said -- “I suddenly occurred to me that I had absolutely no idea what to do with this little baby.” I am guessing Chelsea and Neal had at least one moment like this, and in fact I’d be worried about any parent who told you they never had a moment of worry, anxiety, or fear.

It is in the face of this universal reality that Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about their lives. Do not worry?? You've got to be kidding. Most days, life feels like one worry strung after another like lights on a Christmas tree. Worries at work. Worries at home. Worries about...well, you name it (the country, the world, the environment, economy, the church, this sermon). Do you see what I mean? It is as if we are sweetness and bees are the worries that just won't stop pestering us.

Anybody who is trying to make a dollar in this or any other economy knows that a surefire way to motivate people to purchase your product is to make them worry about what

might happen if they don't. I won't be healthy, I won't be smart, I won't be cool, I won't have enough money, I won't have a car that stops itself, I won't protect my child from predators....for every worry there could be a product designed to make us feel better. If you are cynical about the church you could say that we are in that business as well, giving folks a sense of protection from the biggest worry of all.

So how in the world, then, can Jesus possibly ask us -- really, command us! -- not to worry?

Soren Kierkegaard once defined anxiety as "the next day." We don't know what will happen "the next day," which creates anxiety this day. Therefore, we are consumed on this day with anticipating future misfortunes. Since there is no end to the calamities we can anticipate, we're always uncertain and constantly chasing after something that, we hope, will decrease our level of uncertainty.

This, of course, never works. Acquiring things doesn't reduce anxiety. It generates anxiety. You buy insurance to protect yourself against some kind of risk, which means that you now have one more bill to worry about paying, as well as worry about the loopholes your new insurance policy doesn't cover.

John Meier says that today's text may be seen as a commentary on the Lord's Prayer, "Give us today our daily bread."

Free from anxiety, the disciple is free from confused priorities. One's life and body are the main gifts from God; food and clothing are just means to an end. Not only does Jesus reject anxiety about wealth, he rejects the entire premise of the established market system. Not only can you not serve God and mammon, do not be bothered by the whole mechanism of getting things.

Notice he included both the men, who were mainly involved in food production, and the women, who were mainly involved in clothing production. Despite your very real needs, true life is not about food, or drink, or clothes. True life comes first through the realm of God, a vision that would mean food and clothing for everyone.

Like many of Jesus' sayings, the meaning has become partially lost to us in the 21st century. But some scholars say that this passage points toward disconnecting from a hierarchical system that generated anxiety and worry in the first place. That system is still very much in place today. The names of the players have changed but the positions of power are still the

same. In Jesus' time, there are still the rich, currently on top, but they can't take it with them. The Romans, the chief priests, the tax collectors, and other collaborators are all scrambling to retain their positions.

And Jesus' reference to clothes is because they are the outward mark of social rank. This is true today as well, of course, for those of us who don't shop at Target, but it was really true then. The wealthy, including priests and scribes connected with the Temple establishment, are easily identified by their snazzy robes. Jesus ripped into fancy clothes more than once. In 11:8, he talked about "those who wear soft robes...in royal palaces." It wasn't a compliment there, and it isn't here either. This is a barbed reminder of the high social rank of their overlords.

Another barb follows. "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow." They don't break a sweat. Even that fat cat Solomon -- the original Temple oligarch -- doesn't have as fine a robe as these little flowers. Solomon was not highly regarded by the descendants who lived during Jesus' time, because they remembered that his life of personal opulence was built on heavy taxation. When Solomon died, Galilee withdrew from the united monarchy--they seceded from the union, you might say -- and joined the northern kingdom. You don't do something like that if you're happy with the way things are.

Jesus moves his disciples away from their personal concern and personal fears toward a command to strive "first for the kingdom, and its justice." Then he says, "All these things will be added to you." When the kingdom is lived on earth -- that is, when all people have dignity, when open table fellowship is practiced by all, when hierarchy is upended, when all people are treated as beloved by God -- then indeed there will be peace and plenty and more than enough for everyone.

"Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow," for tomorrow will have its own cares. Besides, Jesus says, there's plenty of evil around right now, today, this minute. Indeed, there is, and he has named it, rejected it, and reframed the nature of the peoples' reality: Your overlords tell you that God blesses the current arrangements, but that is not so. Instead, God has a vision of a world where all are fed and clothed. In the kingdom, people live without anxiety over "the next day."

As we prepare this week for the beginning of Lent you might ask yourself, where is fear being fed in my life? What can you do to live in a less anxious way? What is God calling you to

accept or resist? To give or to receive? What vision is so compelling that you know you must follow it, because it is a directive from the divine? Then you might ask yourself, “Can I live in that space during the forty days of Lent?” Perhaps that is where the resurrection awaits you.

AMEN