

Letting God Provide

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Preaching on:
Matthew 6:24–34

Our scripture reading this morning—in which Jesus tries to convince us to serve only God and advises us not to worry about tomorrow’s problems today—leaves many of us feeling deeply conflicted. If only Jesus has just kept it simple. If only Jesus had just said to us, “You must serve only God, and do your best not to worry too much because it’s no good for you.” If he’d just said that, it would have been easier. But Jesus always goes right for the heart of the matter.

Jesus doesn’t just say to us, “You must serve only God,” he also says to us, “And that means you must stop serving money, and wealth, and stuff,” which makes him seem like he’s either a sort of spiritual idealist with no practical experience in the real world or he’s something like a communist. And Jesus doesn’t just say to us, “Don’t worry,” he also says to us, “Don’t worry even about the most basic necessities—food, water, clothing. Don’t arrange your life to provide for these things. Live like the birds and the grass! Seek the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and everything else will be provided,” which makes it seem like either Jesus is much more naïve than we are or that he’s got a much higher tolerance for risk and discomfort than we do.

So, we love this passage. We want to serve God more faithfully. We want to live simplified lives. We don’t want all this worry and anxiety we’re plagued with. But we also despair at this passage: How can I serve God if I don’t have money? Not having a job or a plan for a financial emergency might cause me even more anxiety than I currently have!

One of the problems I think we have is what I’m doing right now—preaching. Usually, the Gospel is preached as if Jesus did want to make it really simple for all of us, as if there is a really simple, straightforward answer to every one of the weird things that Jesus said to us, but somehow it just got lost in translation. So, in one pulpit on a Sunday the preacher will tell you in fifteen or twenty minutes that the answer is obviously that Jesus wants you to have a job and work hard, he just doesn’t want you to become too greedy. This sermon explains away almost all of the challenge in Jesus’ words and probably reassures you that you’re already on the right side of the line. Good for you. Nothing to see here, move along.

In another pulpit the preacher will tell you that this is just one more example of how Jesus hates money and empire and the inherently exploitative nature of markets and economic systems, and that if we’re to disciple ourselves to him, we must radically excise all that worldly stuff from our lives to fulfill God’s mandate for love and justice on the earth. No one, especially not the preacher, has ever lived up to this sermon. You could quit your job on Monday morning, burn your house down, abandon your family, join the revolution, and MAYBE that will make the world a better place in a better way than any compromise would, but you would still find yourself lacking. What about finding balance and peace and letting God provide for us wherever we may find ourselves in life?

The problem is that the sermon has to explain something, so it’s always looking to make improvements. But what if every weird thing that Jesus ever said to confuse you was done

intentionally? What if Jesus knew that what he was saying was weird and hard, and comforting and challenging, and impossible and motivating? What if Jesus intended for you to wrestle with this teaching through all the phases of your life? What if Jesus intended you to come to it today for comfort in trouble, and tomorrow for the motivation to start a revolution of values?

The philosopher Montaigne who famously said, “What do I know?” (which sums up for me a proper and reverent approach to scripture) once said that philosophy is the art of learning to die. This was sort of a play on words for all those who have said that philosophy is about discovering the best and most virtuous way to live. It’s actually quite brilliant. It asks us to imagine the end of life and, from that perspective, to imagine how we would have wanted to live NOW.

What if we took that perspective with this piece of scripture? Imagine that you’ve come close to a non-anxiety inducing end. You’re 101 years old and you’ve decided to enter hospice. You’ve got a few weeks left to finalize everything. And lying comfortably in your hospice bed you read this passage (our reading this morning) and begin to review your life. From that perspective, how would you have wanted to apply the comfort and the challenge of these words to your life now?

Over Lent I reread Bronnie Ware’s book, *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying: A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing*. Ware was a hospice nurse and she found that there were certain regrets that came up over and over again in her dying patients’ final days. One of the top five regrets was “I wish I hadn’t worked so hard.”

Ware said that she heard this regret from every single male patient she was ever a nurse to. Every single one, fellas. Think about that. She said she heard it from some women too but attributed the difference to a generational difference that demanded work outside the home from men and highly discouraged it for women. People regretted everything they had missed by working too hard—especially precious time with family. And all of us know it’s not just about how many hours you work. It’s about how you work. It’s the stress you carry around with you when you leave the office, the irritability that puts a wall up between you and your loved ones, the worry that follows you home and doesn’t let you rest, doesn’t let you appreciate the simple, divine joy of just being you.

Ware writes, “By simplifying your lifestyle and making conscious choices along the way, it is possible to not need the income that you think you do. And by creating more space in your life, you become happier and more open to new opportunities, ones more suited to your new lifestyle.” So, imagine yourself in your hospice bed one day, with no anxiety or worries. You’ll probably think about how much you worked and how you could have lived differently if you weren’t so focused on maintaining a certain income and lifestyle. You’ll probably know then that those things were less important than you thought. So, now, let’s consider making a resolution in reverse. How can you change your life now in response to the wisdom you will have then with your Bible lying open in your lap to this morning’s scripture lesson. What steps can you take today to prioritize what truly matters?

One of the reasons, I think, that Jesus gives us these hard teachings—like don't worry, like turn the other cheek, like forgive your enemy—is because Jesus knows that these anxiety, and violence, and anger and the desire for revenge—they change us in ways that we don't want to be changed. I may feel justified in my anger today, but I don't realize I'm lowering my threshold for losing my temper tomorrow. I may feel like worrying about today's problem is completely reasonable, but I don't realize that I'm ratcheting up my emotional capacity for and propensity for a lifetime of anxiety. Work is a similar sort of thing. The more work is demanded of us, the less we know how to really take a break, to rest, to restore ourselves, to be present to our family, to know just how to be. Some of us don't retire because we don't know what we would do with ourselves, for example. Now remember, there's nothing wrong with working or with enjoying your work. But if work is the only thing you can imagine that could occupy your time productively, it might be really good for you to sit in the discomfort of just being and just relating and just loving, and letting God do the providing for you for a time.