

# “First for the Kingdom”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – February 3, 2019*

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

Rev. John Wahl

Matthew 6:7-21

Matthew 6:25-34

As soon as we read the words “don’t worry” in this passage, you can almost sense the eye rolls and heads shaking. “Don’t worry?” Most of the time, it feels like there is plenty to worry about: our kids, our jobs, our health, and our bank accounts; leaking roofs and computer viruses and trans-fats. Is Jesus simply saying, *don’t worry, be happy!* Is he offering us a fairy-tale ethic, living without concern and utterly relying on God?

But immediately prior to today’s passage is a different assertion in verse 24, where Jesus says: “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.” Jesus doesn’t say that money in itself is evil, or even bad, just that it makes a poor master.

Why is this? Why can’t we place our loyalty and allegiance in material things? Because to do so is to fall prey to the worldview that crowns money as master in the first place: *scarcity*. The issue is not money; the difficulty comes when we make money our lord. If we are hoping that money will meet our deepest needs, we will be disappointed because there will never be enough; money, after all, is finite. So, once we decide that money can grant us security, then we become stuck in a world of counting, tracking and stock-piling it. In a world of defined by scarcity, there is never enough; no wonder we worry.

According to Jesus, though, God works according to a different “economy” than money. Our heavenly Father does not operate from *scarcity*, but from *abundance*. I think about when my second child, Jack, was born; I did not need to divide the love that I had for my first-born, A.J. in half; I suddenly had more love than I could have possibly imagined before. In some way, no doubt, you have experienced the same thing: how it is true that the more love you give, the more you have. Love – and especially God’s love – cannot be counted, tracked, or stockpiled. In this economy, one of possibility and abundance – what Jesus calls the “kingdom of God” – *not worrying*; or not worrying as much, or as often, actually becomes an option.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose, “In Pictures”

God does not operate from an economy of scarcity; instead, Jesus asks us to consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. When he tells us not to worry about what you will eat, it does not mean that food is unimportant; after all, in this morning's first reading, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray for "daily bread," but then to trust that God will provide it. To be overly concerned or anxious about acquiring food, clothes or other goods for yourself may distract from seeking justice and righteousness around us. Jesus challenges us to place our faith in God for these daily needs; and that if we can trust in God in small, everyday things; then we can also trust God in more complex and challenging things. When Jesus instructs us to "strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well," (v. 34) it sounds a heckuva lot like how the disciples were just taught to pray: "Your kingdom come, your will be done." (v. 10)

Jesus' followers are encouraged to live by faith, trusting God to provide material needs. It seems almost to suggest that we do not need to work or prepare for the future at all; that we can simply relax, confident that God will take care of our needs. But Jesus is not calling us to abandon our families and join a monastery, or to empty out our savings and retirement accounts. Rather, he is addressing the basis for excessive worry and anxiety that might result from a life separated from God; from serving a different lord, or multiple masters. Instead, we are being called to a different set of values and priorities. The Gentiles, those who live outside of the community of faith, seek all these material things and still worry about their life; their social position and status. But a life devoted to God, one lived according to the values of the kingdom of God, has a different focus.<sup>2</sup>

Some people joke about being worry warts; others struggle with anxiety and may require professional help coping with their condition. This, again, is not an indictment of them, or us. It is important for us to be concerned about our families, our health, and our environment (and the list could go on). There are healthy forms of concern and feelings of compassion; many of which we try to support through the ministries of the church. We encourage self-care and care for each other through prayer and fellowship. We exercise compassion toward those in our community and our world who are in need: whether those needs are material or spiritual in nature.

Today, as we hold our annual congregational meeting, we pause to look back on the ways that we have exercised compassion and concern: celebrating the ways that God has been at work in and among and through us; and seeking to assess how we can adjust and adapt to the changing needs of our neighborhood and beyond. The purpose of creating an Annual Report is not to brag or pat ourselves on the back, but instead to highlight both what is already and might yet become. During the meeting,

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Beaton from *WorkingPreacher.com*

we will say thank you to those leaders whose terms of service are ending and elect others who have agreed to step forward and take on new responsibilities. And as we take notice of the ways God has provided generously and abundantly, our trust is renewed that God will continue to provide in the future, as well.

Over the past two years, I have had the great opportunity to participate in the Doctor of Ministry program at Dubuque Seminary. This has only been made possible through the support of the church: the session has pledged financial assistance and it has taken the help of countless congregation members chipping in other ways to offer me the flexibility to travel to Iowa each spring and then devote so much time to my studies during the intervening months.

Truth be told, though, there have been more than a few days when I thought it was not going to be possible to find the hours or the energy to maintain the work-school-family balance. When I think forward to what will be required for the thesis project in order to complete the program, I still sometimes feel paralyzed by worry. The only assurance I have that it will all work out is the recollection that God has provided before; and, therefore, the faith that God will continue operate out of an economy of abundance. Small things – daily food to eat and clothes to wear – teach us to trust in God for the greater things: whether that may be pursuing a degree, or coping with a loss, or overcoming an addiction, or learning to walk again

Consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. What Jesus is trying to show us by turning our attention in these directions is that God does not operate out of scarcity. Instead, as Jesus will soon reveal to his followers, God *resurrects*: God takes what we believe is running low, or running out, or completely empty; what seems to us like it's on the decline or completely empty, and injects new life. This, of course, is the ultimate act of abundance: creating something out of nothing; bringing light from darkness; giving new life to what we had written off.<sup>3</sup>

This is why Jesus instructs his followers to strive first for the kingdom of God; because God wants us not to be paralyzed by anxiousness, fear or worry; but instead to experience the everlasting, never-ending love that is revealed to us through Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Even when things seemed darkest, when his friends had abandoned him, when he suffered even to death, God's renewing love was there in abundance. We can likewise place our faith in the same heavenly Father; and seek first the kingdom and its righteousness. AMEN.

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<sup>3</sup> Janet Hunt, "No More Worries"