

Matthew 6:25-34

Today's reading can be flattened out into a sort of "Don't worry, be happy" that's fun to embroider on inspirational samplers but not real helpful for living life. "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear." It's manifestly evident that we have to "worry," or think ahead and plan, about these things. It was just as much the case in first-century Palestine, too. Food and clothing do not fall from the sky. And while it is true that the birds of the air do not produce tangible goods, and might therefore be characterized as carefree little freeloaders, they are busy all the time. They are out there looking for food and nesting materials and mates, and if they stopped looking they would die, regardless of how much God loves them.

But notice that today's reading began with "therefore." "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life" This message about not worrying is a conclusion to be drawn from something previous. And what was Jesus saying right before this passage?

- Anger and reconciliation
- Adultery in our hearts
- Divorce
- Let your Yes be Yes or your No be No
- Do not retaliate, instead publicly expose the unjust authority
- Love your enemies
- Give alms, but don't make a show of it
- Pray, but don't make a show of it
- Fast, but don't make a show of it
- Store up treasures in heaven not on earth
- Make sure your inner light is healthy

And finally, "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."

"Therefore, do not worry."

The teaching in Verses 25 to 33 is about stopping worrying: anxiety, fear, fretting, fussing. It is **NOT** about stopping planning, being responsible, caring. It is not encouraging us to be passive. Verse 33 says "*strive*" for the kingdom of God, which is a pretty active verb. But it also pits the kingdom of God against wealth, wealth being a way to assure oneself of security and a certain level of immunity from misfortune. Jesus is saying that you cannot be faithful to God as long as you are prioritizing your own security. And I think what's behind that is the notion that when we are attached to an outcome, we are too likely to discount the value of the continuing presence of the kingdom. We confuse our expectations with our intentions.

There's a version of this in the *Bhagavad Gita*, where the warrior Arjuna, about to fight a justified and even necessary battle, tries to draw the line and decline to fight because he has relatives on the opposing side and he doesn't want to kill them. The god Krishna advises him to do his duty as a warrior anyway, saying that he cannot know the future outcome of his efforts and must not be controlled by what he expects will happen, e.g., that he will kill his uncles and teachers. Krishna says that Arjuna should carry out his duty, do the "right" thing in the framework of the story's theology, and detach himself from expectations of the results. In a way, it's like Jesus telling us to live faithfully because if we're attached to the expectation that wealth will deliver us from troubles, we're likely to decide for wealth rather than for the kingdom a hundred times a day, and find ourselves living a bleak and attenuated life. If we set our responsibilities within the framework of first and foremost desiring God's realm and its justice, then our intentions don't get confused with our expectations.

Jesus was constantly trying to get people to rely on each other. When he sent his disciples out, he told them not to carry any backup materials with them, but to accept whatever

hospitality they were offered. He told the lawyer that his neighbor was whoever was in need. He rejected the devil's offer of certainty and security for himself, and he certainly never offered it to his followers, but what he did offer was a way of being in the world. Not results, not success, but a way of being in the world that is infused with God's presence. Following Jesus, contrary to what the prosperity gospel teaches, will not result in miraculous healings or an increase in wealth. It will result in a community of people who have each other's backs when they're sick or broke.

Jesus poses the choice as being between serving money or serving God, and you can see why, because money is shorthand for security. But it's also become a cliché that we can slide around. We deny that we serve money because there's no way to quantify how much is too much psychological energy to give to earning. Or we deny that it's a real choice, because obviously everybody has to live. Too easily, the choice Jesus poses becomes a caricature of God as a demanding perfectionist who's also not that much fun. So I tried re-phrasing the choice, and at the moment my best candidate is, "You can benefit or you can flourish." You can benefit or you can flourish. How's that? You can pursue certain results, or you can live in a way that takes account of all the assets and blessings that are available whether you're succeeding or failing at your pursuits.

This is a little quirky, sort of a sideways illustration of what I mean, but Caroline told me that one of the chambers of commerce that she works with developed a program in which they get senior citizen volunteers to evaluate the storefronts along a commercial corridor and give them a rating, and the best one gets a reward. Caroline loves the idea because, as she says, "I am so tickled by the idea of all these old people scolding lackluster shop owners about cleaning their

windows." I love the idea because it takes account of the assets and blessings that exist, e.g., these senior citizens with standards and principles, and invites them to do what they already know how and want to do anyway, i.e., give suggestions on improving specific things. This process may result in some hurt feelings about my store windows being underappreciated, but it will also result in foot traffic around the neighborhood, chit-chat, earnest discussions about how long Christmas decorations can stay in a window before everyone's sick of them, invitations to coffee for further discussion, and the festive awarding of the prize for best storefront. As the program lead put it to Caroline, "My seniors are already circling." (Like vultures.)

Anything we try will result in set-backs and sometimes failure. Worthy goals that we *should* achieve (like preventing school vouchers from passing the legislature) will fall away from us, and the outcomes will be bad. We are often justifiably worried and anxious that we will not achieve our excellent goals, because (see above) school vouchers. But if we re-focus on our original intentions - and trust that God is still present in our current circumstance - then we can surely flourish in the moment and even someday be surprised by grace.

Extravagant God, you have promised treasure in heaven that outweighs any we could envision or imagine on earth. Help us to pick up the amazing gifts you have already given to us, to flourish rather than to look for benefits. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.