

‘Tis A Gift to be Simple: “Simple Abundance”

Matthew 6:25-34

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?

³¹“Therefore 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.”

All right. Are you anxious yet? What a week it’s been. Are you panicked? Has your confidence been shaken? If not, why not? The stock market has seen the absolute worst week in its 112 year history. It’s lost 22% in the last eight days. Down 40% since last October’s record high. Trillions have been lost in retirement funds. Stocks are selling at bargain basement prices, but no ones buying because they are shell-shocked and petrified by possible future declines. Henry Herrman who heads investments for Waddell and Reed, says, “You make a decision and you look dumb the next day. So you go to gold, and then gold is down. You go to Treasurys, they rally, then they get their noses punched in.”^[1]

On our dollar bill, and all of our paper currency, we have that wonderfully paradoxical statement that “In God We Trust.” But when there’s blood in the financial streets, the place where we really put our trust is revealed to be “In money we trust.” Or, “In Mammon we trust,” to use the biblical term that regarded money to be an idol we worship.

For some of us, as Bob Dylan wrote, “When you got nothing, you’ve got nothing to lose.” When that’s the case, when you’ve got nothing, you may not worry about the stock market. That doesn’t mean that you’re still not anxious about your life. If we’re not anxious about one thing, we’re anxious about another. Why? Because absolutely nothing that’s based in this transient life is secure. Ever. Life comes with no guarantees. As preacher Bill Coffin once put it, “God gives minimum protection, but maximum support.”

It’s weeks like this that puts the question to us all over again: “In whom do you place your trust?” And you know what? It’s not a new question. It’s the same

question that has been put to an anxious humankind since the beginning of time. And it's never prompted by good times. It's the hard times that raise this question for us. And it may be the reality of financial insecurity, or health-related insecurity, or relationship insecurity, or housing insecurity, or, ultimately, the insecurity we all face as creatures who are born to die. In whom do we place our trust so that our lives will not be ridden with anxiety and fear? How can we be non-anxious in an absolutely insecure world? Maybe it just can't be done.

And if nothing is secure, then who is this Jesus to come along and tell us, "Do not worry about your life!"? "Be not anxious," a better translation says, "life is more than food and clothing. Consider the birds, consider the lilies. Do not worry. Strive for God's kingdom and these things will be added to you." It's either the silliest thing Jesus ever said, or the most important, and it is, I think, at the very heart of his Gospel, the Good News; the Good News which Jesus Christ himself is.

How can you believe such a thing? That God will provide if you stop worrying? "Consider the birds." Well, all right, let's consider the birds. We've got a few bird watchers here and they know that birds work hard. All day long, sun-up to sun-down, they are thinking always about food, shelter, security. If they don't, they die. I forget the exact figure, but an astonishingly high percentage of robins dies every year because they don't plan ahead. They sing on occasion, even on occasion for the sheer enjoyment of it, but mostly, I am told, the singing is functional – a warning, a flirtation, an invitation to romance or at least nest building, which is where romance leads. This instruction to "consider the birds" is hardly an invitation to stop working hard. We are not being urged to sit back and do nothing. We are to be diligent in doing what needs to be done. Rather, "Do not worry!"

Frederick Buechner argues that to tell a person not to worry is like telling a person with a head cold not to sneeze. We worry. Many of us become expert at it – capable of worrying pretty much all the time, about our schedules, our appearances, our children, our health – about which we are capable of worrying that the worst that can happen will happen: the stomach distress is actually a terrible and terminal disease and the sudden chest pain is a heart attack – but maybe indigestion; our child is out too late, in a car accident, no doubt.

I think it helps to understand what prompted Jesus to say it. It was a man who asked him to resolve a family argument, the quintessential family feud over money. "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." There is no bitterness as bitter as the conflict which ensues over who gets what from the estate. Jesus doesn't touch it, but tells a story about a rich farmer whose barns will not hold all he has and so tears down the barns, builds bigger barns, fills them, and then makes a big mistake – he says to his soul, "Soul, you have ample

goods laid up for many years. *Relax, eat, drink, be merry.*” And then the stock market crashed.

The man isn't bad. He has broken no laws, stolen no property, exploited no workers. His wealth is a result of good soil, seed, and favorable weather. He's had a good harvest – like a long bull market. But he's a fool, says Jesus. He really has nothing. His whole world is bounded by the perimeters of his limited perspective. There's no one else. Just a man and his possessions, his stuff, his status. In having material abundance, he thinks he has security, that he's “made” – a fool.

“Do not worry about your life,” Jesus said to them and to us. “Life is more. Strive for God's kingdom, and all these things will be added to you.” It's about your center, your soul, that interior place where you are most who you are, where you establish your goals, the purpose and meaning of your life. We are made to have God and God's kingdom there. And when God is not there, when something else is there – success, influence, status, wealth – things are basically out of sync and nothing feels quite right. Nothing is enough. When you depend on wealth or status or any worldly security for your salvation, there is never enough.

That is what Jesus meant. That is why these words of his, so utterly contrary to the culture in which we live, haunt us so. That's why we can never quite forget them. “Do not worry about your life.”

When I first started studying this passage, I was irritated by it, resented it. Does this passage irritate anyone else here? I mean, how can anyone struggling to make ends meet on a modest salary provide food and clothing for a family, pay a mortgage, car payments, appliances, doctor bills and not worry, not be anxious, not think a lot about life and food and clothing and security? It seemed to me that you could follow Jesus or worry about life, but I was not much of a success at following and not worrying.

Gradually, I have understood. Something Dietrich Bonhoeffer said about the passage helps me. “The life of discipleship can only be maintained as long as nothing is allowed to come between Christ and ourselves. This is not a moral law, a rule to be followed” Bonhoeffer wrote, “it is the Gospel of Christ.”^[2]

This is good news: that our accumulated wealth, our status, our influence do not save us. I think every one of us really knows this deep inside. Our salvation is in God's love revealed in Jesus Christ. Our truest and best and happiest life is in receiving God's love, being transformed by it and then slowly letting go of everything in which we have invested for our salvation, loosening our grip on whatever it is we are squeezing so hard, and then beginning to share and give and love and live.

And then I believe something wonderful and important begins to happen. There's a simple sense of abundance that fills us. That emptiness inside becomes

full. The hole that leached away the joy of life is finally stopped up. When we stop striving and worrying and scrambling and hustling; when we stop, we begin, perhaps for the first time to see what we have – what God has given us: our lives, our dearest ones, our friends, the beautiful world; to see, perhaps for the first time, how very much we have, how very much we have to be thankful for.

But we need to let go of our false securities in order to receive God's abundance. Do you remember Soren Kierkegaard's story called The Secret Garden? It's about a woman who was wealthy, had inherited a lot of wealth, who felt Christ's call in her life, who was more and more bringing herself into the relationship, she was even considering full-time Christian vocation, but she kept struggling with this and kept finding a lot of resistance within her, a lot of hesitation and problems within her. She kept bringing more and more of herself to God, all but a secret garden that she had, that she had had since she was a very little girl in this wealthy family.

Her father had given her her own little garden, and it was very important to her; it was her own private space, it was the place she went to be alone. It was her personal treasure. And later in life, it was where she could go to pray and meditate and refresh her soul. It had come to have a great deal of meaning to her in that regard. But it was such a source of enjoyment that it came to represent what she was withholding from God. She was resisting and holding out on this secret garden. The Garden actually became a blockage between her and God. And as Kierkegaard wrote so skillfully, it wasn't until she gave up the key to her secret garden that she felt the full confirmation of God's presence in her life. When she gave up the key to that which was most important to her, then – and only then – was she filled with an abundance she had never known.

Now, what is your secret garden? It may be possessions, or prestige, or money, or a significant relationship. Your secret garden is that area where we just build this wall around it and lock it up and say "Everything God but this. And I dare you to get it!" But then something – maybe the Holy Spirit – starts to work in our lives and we come to the point that we see what is keeping us from God's joy. And we finally give up the key to our secret garden. For many of us it is the last obstacle we've been holding up to block our relationship with God. And we're filled with joy because we've finally given up our idols.

That's why Jesus could say what he said. "Strive first for God's kingdom and all these things will be given to you as well."

That's why the early church rejoices in the middle of persecution; it is why St. Paul urges, over and over, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God." That's how Paul could write those words as their world was

collapsing around them and their dear ones were being arrested and hauled off to execution. "Rejoice.... Give Thanks."

It is why the early Christians startled their pagan neighbors by singing hymns of thanksgiving at their funerals.

It is why those brave and hearty souls, their numbers decimated by disease, hunger, and death, perched precariously on the edge of the North American wilderness, paused in the autumn of 1621 to give thanks to God.

"Do not worry about your life," Jesus said.

One of the great Christians of this century was Dr. William Barclay, a prolific writer of Bible commentaries, and a noted Scottish theologian and teacher. He died back in 1978 but his prolific writings are still very influential.

Not long after his funeral, a relative was going through his belongings and found a piece of paper, yellow with age, at the top of which were the words An Act of Commitment. It was a written commitment William Barclay had made to God on his 16th birthday while a student at Glasgow University. Apparently, Barclay then continued to add his signature again every year on his birthday as a way of renewing that commitment. The well-worn paper shows that he signed the commitment every year from age 16 to just before he died at age 71.

In the Act of Commitment, Barclay had surrendered his life to God. He consecrated to God all he was and all that he had, his mind, his body, his possessions, his time and his influence over others, all to be used for God's glory. He ended his pledge of commitment with these words:

"To Thee, O Lord, I leave the management of all events and say without reserve, not my will but Thine be done."

It was the key to the secret garden of his heart, and in surrendering his heart to God, Barclay found an endless abundance of life in God. The greatest life we can possibly live consists not of seeking personal well-being and financial security, rather the greatest life is found by being "rich toward God."

"Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. Strive for God's kingdom and these things will be given to you as well." In this simple teaching, you'll find the abundance of God.

In this, you can securely trust. Thanks be to God.

[1] *Wall Street Journal*, “Wild Day Caps Worst Week Ever for Stocks,” October 11, 2008.

[2] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 159-161.