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CONSIDER THE LILIES

This text is an American scandal. Worrying, after all, is very lucrative in a land of hyper-individualistic capitalism. Then along comes Jesus, like some first-century Bobby McFerrin to say, “Don’t worry, be happy.” Or, since I was an avid reader of Mad magazine as a kid, I can’t help but think of Alfred E. Newman’s breezy life motto: What, Me Worry?

It all sounds so lovely and simple. Have faith in God and then live as free as a bird, as radiant and self-possessed as the lilies of the field. Strive not after your own security or prosperity, but only seek the kingdom of God, and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Really?

I can stop worrying about my retirement? There’s a whole investment industry out there making sure that I worry about it. What’s the magic number that means you will retire in comfort and style? Whatever you think it is, my deluded friend, it’s not enough. One recent ad shows a couple of financial advisors talking about how they help people to stop worrying.

“People bring me this box,” says one concerned and compassionate sounding woman, “and it’s got their whole life inside it.” She means of course, records of their checking and savings account, whatever investments they own, whatever assets they possess, etc. “And we look at that and we get to work. We tell them, we can do this!” Meaning really, “That’s all you’ve got and you think that’s enough?”

This is like a modern version of the story of the loaves and fishes, except for private consumption. We can multiply this meager representation of your meager little life and make you into somebody. That’s all you’ve got? Don’t be happy, worry. By the time we’re done, you and yours will be welcomed at the

table of the feast of prosperity and there will even be enough left over for your kids to fight about.

Years ago, when I was in graduate school, I was reading a work by perhaps the most brilliant and influential rhetorician of the modern era, Kenneth Burke. In his classic, *Language as Symbolic Action*, Burke offered a definition of human beings, what he called the “human animal”, that I have never forgotten. He defined you and me this way (pre-inclusive language): Man is the symbol-using, symbol-making, symbol misusing animal, inventor of the negative, separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making, goaded by the spirit of hierarchy, and rotten with perfection.

There is so much here that one sermon could never unpack it all, but Burke knows that as human beings, unlike other animals, we live by our symbols, that humans alone understand what something is by knowing what it is not (the negative), that we are separated from the natural world by our gadgets, that we are “goaded” by the spirit of hierarchy (intensely competitive and fascinated with who is on top and who’s not), and (my favorite phrase of all), “rotten with perfection” – unable to be content with who and what we are, but always trying to be or become something different, something better, something “perfect.”

I thought of Burke when I read this famous passage from the Sermon on the Mount, because Jesus is confronting how rotten we are with perfection, and what it does to us and to everyone around us. Strangely, Burke once explained how humans and animals are different by comparing them to birds, which do not understand symbolic activity. He recalls seeing a bird trapped in a college classroom once. The windows were open, but the bird kept flying up to the ceiling, rather than out the window (we’ve all seen this). If the bird could only use symbols to communicate, then we could simply inform the bird of the open window and it could fly to freedom. But its instincts tell it to fly up, crashing again and again into the ceiling.

How odd that Jesus also uses birds to illustrate what it means not to be “rotten with perfection.” “Look 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?”

Well, that’s an interesting question, and I know how the Sierra Club would answer it: no, we are not of more value – we are all creatures that must share the planet. When Rachel Carson wrote her groundbreaking book on the environmental crisis in 1970, she titled it, “*Silent Spring*,” and speculated on what would happen if we did not change our ways. There would be no birds to

herald the springtime. Recently thousands of birds fell from the sky in Arkansas, and that is more than a little bit unsettling.

Jesus may be assuming that humans think we are superior, as when Burke refers to us as being “goaded with the spirit of hierarchy,” but there is something else at work here. And that is the notion that there is something in humans that makes us miserable because we cannot simply be. We cannot seem to take unself-conscious joy in just existing. “To be or not to be, that is the question.” “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

I honestly believe that those final words got added to the words of Jesus by Matthew, who is well-known for adding on material at the end, and sometimes at the beginning of the teachings of Jesus. It’s odd that Jesus would tell us not to worry, and then conclude with an admission that “tomorrow will bring worries of its own.” I think the real end of the passage comes right before it, verse 33: “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

That is, he admits that we need food, clothing, and shelter. Even the Gentiles need these things, and so God knows, everybody needs them. But the object of your life should not be to secure them, to multiply them, and to be anxious about losing them. Your first thought should be to participate in the Reign of God, to share the wealth, to forgive the offense, to heal the sick, to liberate the captive, to shelter the orphan, to protect the weak ones of this world, and then these necessities will be given to you as well.

This is completely counter-intuitive. We acquire by not giving ourselves and our money away. And if we do charity work, or if we tithe to our church, or if we empty our pockets to every beggar we see in order to be repaid then this becomes just another transaction. We’re still trying to get rich, but now we are doing it by first becoming poor. There is an enormous branch of the church which preaches this, and it’s called The Prosperity Gospel. You give in order to get, and that is the exactly opposite of this teaching. If you give expecting a return then you are still striving and you are still worrying.

What Jesus is calling for, I think, is a new orientation. That “faith” as we have understood it (as believing stuff in order to get stuff), is not pleasing to God. Rather, faith should be a form of deep, trans-rational trust. Trans-rational as opposed to irrational. Faith, as I am coming to understand it, is not certainty (since nothing is certain), but rather a form of radically embodied trust that is oriented toward love, that gives the benefit of the doubt, that is generous, unselfish, and compassionate, that gets itself out of its own way, that

does not take direct aim at happiness, and then finds happiness as a by-product.

This is difficult for so many people because they are trapped in the past, living with regret about what might have been. Their hearts are full of yellow newspaper and old photographs, and they wish they could go back. You can tell them this is foolish. You can even quote Omar's famous stanza: The moving finger writes, and having writ,/Moves on; nor all thy piety nor wit/ Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,/Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it.

But escaping that prison cannot be accomplished by simple instruction. The personal prisons in which we live, trapped by feelings of deep insecurity and unworthiness, locked down by fear and constantly self-medicating, cannot be unlocked by cleverness or by logic or by some cheerful, good advice. Escape from the prison of self is a derivative of grace, and that is the gospel truth. We can't do it alone. Human beings left entirely to their own devices will inevitably devise their own demise.

There is no better time to be happy, contented, and amazed by life than right now, since right now is all we have. Not later when our ship comes in. If you live in a house with indoor plumbing and a roof that doesn't leak your ship has already come in. If you know someone who loves you, and if you can give love to that person in return, you are twice blessed. If you have friends that you can call on when you need to talk, then you are wealthy. If you own a Labrador (or some other equally loyal animal), then you are obscenely rich.

The past is a time, not a place. We can't live there. The future is not a Cinderella moment without the stroke of midnight. No one understood this better than Lucy, of all people, in that great American comic strip, Peanuts: "She says, "I never think about the past. Also, I never worry about the future." It sounded a little smug to Charlie, so he asks: "What about the present" Whereupon Lucy explodes her frustration in huge block letters: THE PRESENT DRIVES ME CRAZY!"

Most of us are either hauling around too much from the past, or spending too much time anticipating days that will be better because they will be different, days we never live, only hope to live. And we forget the words of the apostle Paul: "I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content." Not complacent or satisfied, but content - that state of mind which makes the most of the way things are, good or bad.

The 18th century German philosopher Schiller tried to say the same thing: "He who neglects the present moment throws away all he has." It's a problem

for all of us. It's a problem for me. Sometimes I walk around practicing a lecture that has yet to be given (the perfect lecture, where the students listen attentively, ask brilliant questions, and then burst into applause at the conclusion). Sometimes I anticipate the perfect sermon (whatever that is, exactly), and then I fear that the perfect sermon would get me fired.

I have done my share of woolgathering, as my parents called it, which is just a polite way of saying that I talk to myself a lot, and I daydream more than more people. For years, my children have understood this, and if I'm sitting at the dinner table, but mentally elsewhere, they say: "Earth to Daddy! Earth to Daddy!"

But the truth is we all carry around inside ourselves some vision of the perfect joy, the perfect marriage, the perfect day. I know I do. For me it starts with coffee (everything for me starts with coffee), and of course, a copy of the New York Times. The headline reads: MEYERS WINS THE MASTERS (but insists he cannot continue on the PGA tour because of Sunday morning conflicts.) My church is perfect, full of perfect people. The steeple paints itself every three years, and everyone agrees that the music is perfect, the sermons are perfect, and the budget will perfectly balance itself.

Rotten with perfection. How perfectly that describes the human animal. And then along comes Jesus to say, do not worry. Orient yourself toward the kingdom of God, not as a strategy, but as a way of being in the world, and the rest will take care of itself.

This emphasis on the present moment is nothing new. There is an old Sanskrit proverb hanging on the wall of my study which reads.... "Yesterday is but a dream/And tomorrow is only a vision./But today well lived/Makes every yesterday a dream of happiness/And every tomorrow a vision of hope./Look well, therefore, to this day."

Paul said once, in his letter to the Romans: "In all this, remember how critical the moment is."

I read about a farmer once who had lived on the same farm all his life. It was a good farm, but with the passing years, he had begun to tire of it. He longed for a change - for something "better." Every day he found a new reason for criticizing some feature of the old place. Finally, he decided to sell it, and listed the farm with a real estate broker who promptly prepared a sales advertisement. As one might expect, it emphasized all the farm's advantages: ideal location, modern equipment, healthy stock, acres of fertile ground, etc.

Before placing the ad in the newspaper, the Realtor called the farmer and read the copy to him for his approval. When he had finished, the farmer cried out, "Hold everything! I've changed my mind. I am not going to sell. I've been looking for a place like that all my life."

If there is one constant message that all the saints have tried to communicate through the centuries it is this: don't don't miss this moment. Be aware, be mindful, be present. In every waking hour, a sacred theater is in session, played out before an audience that is largely blind. Until this blindness is overcome, there is no revelation. What we need, said the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, is to acquire a kind of "second naivete."

We think the world is ordinary, but it's not. Seventeenth century Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer was said to have made masterpieces out of nothing – a woman reading a letter, or asleep at a table. Critics call his work the "timeless contemplation of the ordinary," and (my favorite phrase), "eternalizing the moment."

That should be everyone's pastime, "eternalizing the moment." Annie Dillard called it "luminescence." As one poet puts it: "One can be amazed at the simplest things, like the fact that my coffee actually stays in the cup, and the steam dances above it like a veil of waking, like a song of consciousness."

No one in the history of the American stage ever brought this message home with more beauty and urgency than did Thornton Wilder, in his classic play *Our Town*. Set in the tiny village of Grover's Corner, the heroine, Emily, is caught up in the endless cycles of life in a small 19th century New England town. People come and go, marry, raise children, hope, laugh, love, and die – just as they do elsewhere.

Emily leads a blissful, puritanical existence. She is innocent, curious, and without a care – as are most children who are loved and allowed to have a childhood. She later falls in love with George Gibbs and marries right out of high school – just when everyone in Grover's Corner is supposed to get married.

All the ladies of the church said there was never a more beautiful wedding and never a more handsome couple. All was well, life was safe and right. And then something happens that made even Grover's Corner seem cruel. Emily dies in childbirth. Just in the moment of joy and new beginnings, death comes.

What happens next is only possible through the magic of the stage. Wilder asks the audience to pretend that it can see as God sees, both the living

and the dead. The scene is a dreary day, the day of Emily's funeral, and two groups of people are huddled on stage. One group, represents the living and they stand around Emily's freshly dug grave. A second group, standing off to one side, represents the people in Grovers Corner who have died. They are ghosts, if you will, who can talk and feel and be heard by the audience, but not by the living.

Emily has now joined their ranks, and they can be seen and heard trying to comfort her. She cannot believe that life is over so soon, that it went so fast, so she decides to make a special request.

She asks if she can go back and live one of the days of her life over again – just one day, to remember what it was like to be alive. The dead tell her it would be a mistake, because, when she goes back, she will know what living people never know...she will know the future. She will not only live a day of her life again, but will see herself living it, and they warn her that it will be painful, but she insists.

“Oh, I shall pick a happy day...my 12th birthday.” So the wish is granted, and the scene shifts, and it is Emily's house, on her 12th birthday. At center stage, the tiny figure of Emily, dressed in white, appears in her mother's kitchen. She has gotten up and dressed for a day of exploring and fun. All the while, the ghost of Emily the grown woman, watches from the corner of the stage, and we can hear her voice.

She sees familiar sights, and exclaims: “There's Main Street...why, there's Mr. Morgan's drugstore before he changed it!...and there's the livery stable.” Then she sees her mother...“Mama, I'm here,” but of course her mother can't hear her. “Oh, how young mama looks. I didn't ever know that mama was that young.”

She sees her favorite neighbor come in and deliver milk, and her father cries out, “Where's my birthday girl!” The memories flood back and it gets hard for Emily to watch. She speaks to us from among the dead: “I can't bear it... they're so young and beautiful. Why did they ever have to get old? Mama, I'm here...I'm grown up...I love you all, everything...Oh, I can't look at everything hard enough. There's the butternut tree...there's the High School, forever and ever...and there's the Congregational church where I got married. Oh, dear, I don't think I can look anymore.”

Just then she sees herself enter the kitchen, as a 12-year old, to have breakfast. Her mother gives her some motherly advice: “Chew that bacon slow [Emily], it'll keep you warm on a cold day.”

Then we hear the ghost of Emily saying softly, but urgently, one of the most powerful lines ever uttered in the theater: “Oh mama, just look at me one minute as if you really saw me. Mama, fourteen years have gone by. I’m dead. You’re a grandmother, mama. I married George Gibbs, Mama. Wally’s dead too, mama. His appendix burst on a camping trip to North Conway. We felt just terrible about it – don’t you remember? But just for a moment now we’re all together. Mama, just for a moment we’re happy. Let’s look at one another.”

Before this day is over, promise me that you will look at someone, really look at them – and not wait to tell them how you feel. This is our town. This is our life. This is the only day we have for sure, because tomorrow is given to no one.

Did you smell the air this morning? That’s spring. Did you hear the birds? Thank God this spring will not be silent.

Did you wake anxious or grateful? Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin. Yet I tell you Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

Which master do you serve? God or wealth? Remember, there are no pockets in a shroud. Will you be happy, “one of these days,” when things are different? This is the only one of “those days” that you have for certain. Are you “rotten with perfection?” Then throw out your old rotten self and follow your bliss.

Look...see...feel...and speak. If you love someone, don’t wait to tell them. If you need to forgive someone, do it now. Do it now...while you still can. Take care of others, and you will be taken care of. Take care only of yourself, love only yourself, and you will die alone in your own arms.

Amen.