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Matthew 6:24-34

WHAT, ME WORRY?

In the 1950s, a face began to grace the covers of a new magazine of off-the-wall and irreverent humor called Mad Magazine. This now familiar face, distinguished by jug ears, a missing front tooth, and a row of freckles across the bridge of the nose. Alfred E. Neuman is credited with the catch phrase, “What, me worry?” which has had some impact on the cultural world and reflects a sort of relaxed, inattentive, apathetic approach to life. He seemed to not care about any of the strife and turmoil going on - economic issues, political problems, ideological debates seemed not to bother Alfred E. But in the spring of 1979, just after the Three Mile Island Nuclear plant accident, Alfred E. Neuman was finally pictured saying, “Yes, me worry!” Hey, at least when Alfred worried he worried about something worth worrying about!

Jesus tells us in this passage not to worry, and many people read only those three words, but Jesus says it as a balanced statement. I do not think that Jesus is laying out “do not worry” as if it were a platitude, something that can be easily accomplished with enough faith. That kind of theology leads to the malpractice of preachers who tell their flocks (and anyone else who will listen) that calamity is a result of too little faith, or that you only worry if your faith is lacking. All of a sudden faith is a competition, winner take all – nothing could be further from the gospel. Jesus doesn't just say “do not worry”, he wants us to worry about the right things. He has a lot of teaching to do before he gets to the worrying part, which is separated from all of the other sayings with one word: therefore. So, what Jesus has to say *before* “do not worry” is a critical part of what worrying means and what he is teaching us to pay attention to. We must know both parts if we are to understand to which direction the path of Jesus calls us.

Even the Lectionary works against us in this effort. It has us begin right at the end of the preface to Jesus' “therefore” and *therefore* we miss the important preface. What Jesus recommends to us is what might be best called a reorientation. He starts by saying that we should not “Store up for yourselves treasures on earth, which will get eaten by moths and corroded by rust. Stockpile your treasure in heaven. For the place where your treasure is, that is the place you will most want to be.”

Then he reminds us that the eye is the lamp of the body – if you do not see correctly, then nothing else will work out very well. If you see the world with eyes of wonder and hope, then there is a direct effect on your body. If you see the world with eyes of mistrust and suspicion, it too produces an effect. A keenly honed eye is critical for a life of faith, for often what we are hoping for is almost invisible.

Then Jesus says the words we began with: “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” Now, that may seem like a pretty direct economic instruction. And maybe that's why you probably don't hear this one preached in the “prosperity gospel” churches or evoked at the state capital prayer breakfasts. But I will push us this morning to think a little bit more deeply on this one. I don't necessarily think that Jesus is saying that money is bad, but that it makes a poor master...or in the language that gets used here, it makes a poor kurios, which means Lord. Once we believe that money can provide us security or fulfill our every need, or that it is the point, then we begin to hoard it like starving rats. Scarcity becomes our reality, while Jesus asks us to consider abundance – a supremely different model than we have today.

Consider the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns. They are not tied down by a job description nor does their sense of value come from a 401K. If anything the Gospel today wants us to redirect our vision and our lives, probably in the same way that the lives of the first hearers needed to be redirected. It calls us to turn away from the anxiety that comes with a life defined by "not enough". Lives which demand we believe that our value comes from our ability to earn and hoard more...it calls us toward a trust in God that allows us to start from a place of "enough" and to be focused on the things that lead to God, not the things that lead to money. What will we cling tightly to? That is the question...and the answer.

I'll grant us all one thing - these teachings are hard to contend with. Last Christmas Eve I was in the garage trying to put together a new bike. It was midnight because the kids were just too excited to go to bed and I'm in the freezing cold garage (just in case they wake up and wander into the living room and I blow the whole Santa thing in one fell swoop). I am reading the instructions having turned the pamphlet over 14 times to find the English section, since I don't trust my Spanish beyond a restaurant menu, and I can't find part A or bolt B4 or the special fitting for the handlebars or the specialized allen wrench that they apparently make for only this fitting. I can see the words right in front of me, but I can't make the pieces fit together. That's how I sometimes feel when I read these words and try to think about how to make my life work alongside my faith. Because if I'm being asked to sell all my possessions and give everything to the poor, living each day as a completely devoted follower of Jesus, I may not be ready for that. So, how do I hear these words? How do I, as a comfortable, middle-class citizen in the richest country in the world, make sense of these teachings? To be honest, they cause me a lot of anxiety.

But let me suggest something to you. That's good. The worst place for Christians to be is in places of comfort. We need to be a questioning people, we need to be a people in tension, we need to be resurrection people who are interested as much in what can be as what is...and that means being

sensitive to imbalance, having some discomfort and living in the tension of figuring out how to be a follower of Jesus in a world of Empire. This is a not a new thing. Paul constantly evokes in his followers a sense of being servants for Christ – slaves for Christ is what he actually says, and the later letters of the early Christian experience say that we are “not of this world”, which really translates not of this *era* – meaning that we live in a time whose values we stand apart from. This era says, “get what you can however you can”, but we say “love your neighbor as yourself”.

This is very challenging, especially when you benefit from this era being the way that it is. I went recently to a website called globalrichlist.com in which you can enter your annual salary and it will “rank” you in terms of the world population by your wealth. I am the 41,944,758 richest person in the world – which places me in the top 1%. Me, with my 1400 square foot house built in the 1950s and my two cars which are both around 10 years old and what I consider to be a pretty modest lifestyle, though I do own an LCD TV...I'm in the top 1%! And the chances are that you are too. Even a person making poverty level wages as defined by the federal government is still in the top 10% in the world. That might give us some pause to reflect in some way. It might let us see that we have choices to make in the here and now, and it might also point out to us that money is a relative thing. What makes for poverty here might not be the same somewhere else. What constitutes enough?

That's part of the reason this teaching is so challenging, I don't think that it really is about money. It is about orientation. This is as much a cultural statement for us today as a spiritual one. Look around. The message that we get is that money solves everything. And it may be true that our lives get easier in some ways with money, but as anyone who has traveled with us to Nicaragua will tell you, money often gets in the way of much more than it fixes. I read in Newsweek the other day that as George Clooney began to use his celebrity to help advocate for Darfur, he discovered that celebrity and money didn't always help. John Avlon, who wrote the Newsweek piece, said, “Clooney donated money to build a well, huts, and a community center. A year later, the next-door villagers—who wanted water and needed shelter—ended up killing some of the people to get to that well and to get to that shelter.” Sometimes throwing money at a problem isn't the answer.

Last week I also read an article from the UCC on a church in Cecil, Wisconsin, population 400. Moira Finley is the pastor of St. John's UCC in Cecil and Trinity UCC in Shiocton, 22 miles away, and oversees the hugely successful Cecil Community Clothes Closet operation at St. John's. Though the congregation numbers about 80, which usually means about 40, they run a remarkably successful clothing closet that serves a growing population that can't even afford the Goodwill store. They don't really know where the clothes come from, but they seem to typically have exactly what they need when they need it and whether it's a nice shirt for a job interviewee, steel-toed boots for a construction worker, or a soft, stuffed animal for a child, the Closet meets many and various needs. Theirs is a ministry at which they have thrown very little money but instead kept clearly in mind a sense of justice, human dignity and compassion...and that has fueled their efforts.

The reason Jesus tells the rich young man to sell all he has and give it to the poor is that he knows where his compass lies...he knows what his god is, and it isn't God, it is money. So I suggest again to you that one of the ways that we are most fully followers of Jesus in our place and culture is

to defy the dominant cultural “norms”. It means taking the time to be uncomfortable so that we can see what comfort really is. It means taking a day to fast so that we are more grateful for the food that we take for granted. It means increasing our awareness by decreasing our comfort. We are inundated by the message that money makes you happy or that stuff can fulfill your every need and if we do not fast from those messages, we gorge ourselves on a meal that is counter-productive to the gospel itself. We must choose a god. Will it be God or any number of things that we place in the position of idolatry, including the easy lure of “stuff”?

Look at us here in the States. We are the richest country in the world and yet happiness is no more prevalent here than anywhere else. Anxiety and worry abound among people who have no financial concerns at all. Look at our relationship to food, material possessions and even things like our perception of success. We are out of balance. In his book, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* (Yale University, 1999), social psychologist David Myers studies the correlation between material wealth and happiness, and he says:

From 1960-1993, real income in America doubled--but during that same time the divorce rate doubled, teen suicide tripled, juvenile violence quadrupled, and unwed births quintupled. Although the average American has more money today, there is "less happiness, more depression, more fragile relationships, less communal commitment, less vocational security, more crime and more demoralized children."

We are worrying, no doubt....but are we worrying about the right things? I submit to you that there is a place for worry in our lives if it is correctly oriented. Again, this is about our orientation - what is important to us is reflected in what we spend our resources on. How can one love a partner and not worry about a diagnosis? How can one love their children and not worry about their future? The absence of worry is not what I hear Jesus advocating here, and I don't think that his realignment of the world precludes us from taking care of our needs. In fact, he expressly says that God knows we have needs. His concern seems to be what are we worried about? Are we concerned about the state of the mentally ill? Are we worried about how the single mother will make it with rising costs and shrinking resources? Do we have anxiety about how a family trying to build a better life for themselves in the 'land of opportunity' will survive being demonized as the source of all our ills, even if they have made it here in violation of the law? Are we worried about justice? Are we worried about how someone else will make it? Do we worry about the orphan and the widow, those on the edges of life in the shadow of oppression?

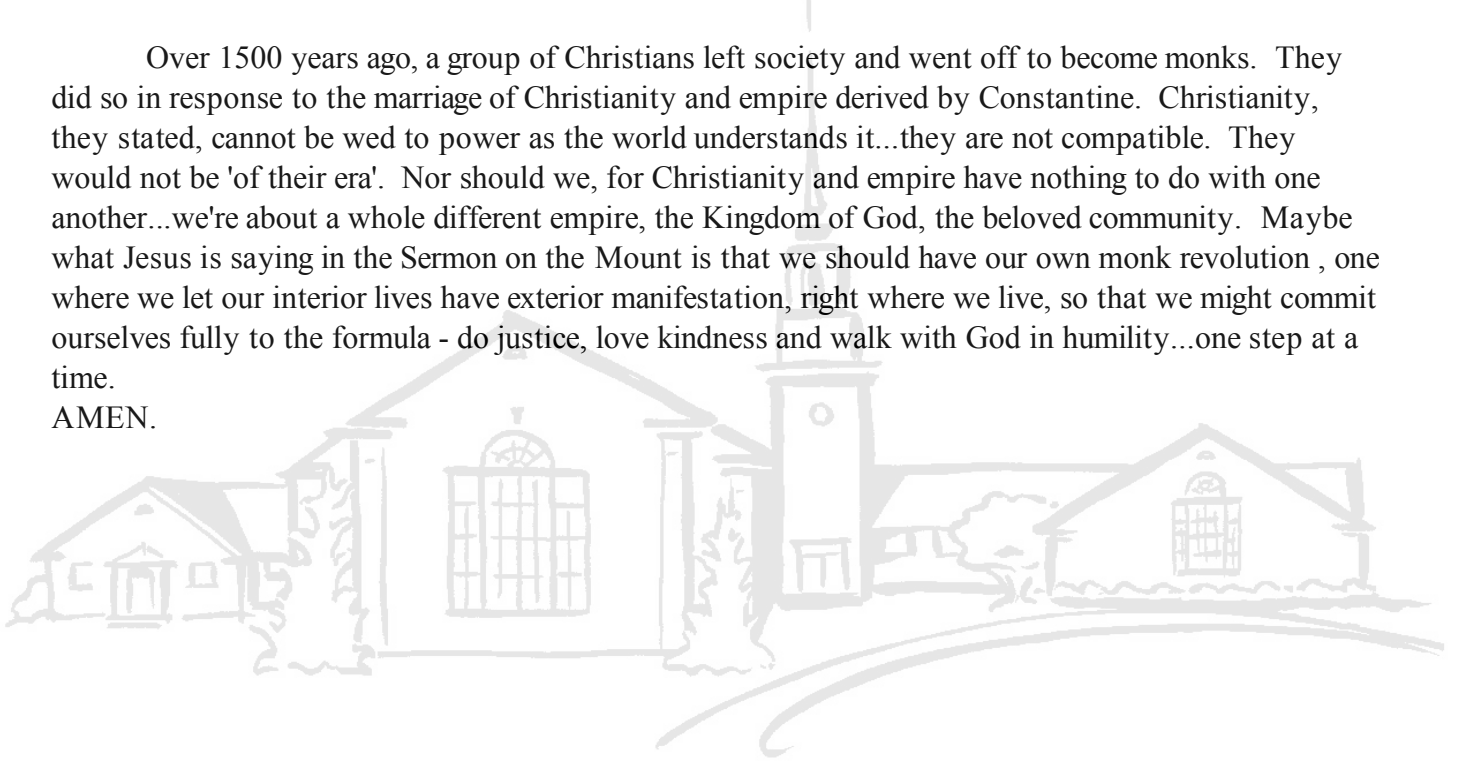
Look to the birds, or consider the lilies is Jesus' way to say that there is an order to God's creation and it does not begin with money, it begins with justice. When we are oriented towards justice and compassion, then economics work themselves out...just as if we attend to the soil and the watering, a garden grows. We're usually backwards. We worry about money first and foremost, and then give a little lip service to justice and compassion if the time allows.

There is a clear formula that Jesus is presenting us with. He never says "do not worry", he says "do not worry about your life". In Greek he could be saying do not worry about your soul, or your life breath, or your human person. Jesus is teaching us to worry less about ourselves and more about

justice and the Kingdom of God and God's 'righteousness', which really means the essence of God. Instead of investing so much energy in accumulation and consumption, we might spend more time embodying justice and incarnating compassion...the things that make for the Kingdom. And, Jesus reminds us in a great twist of psychological support, we should do so in the moment. For today's worries are enough for today. We need not worry about tomorrow's anxiety - it will come as sure as the sun will rise. What, me worry? Yes, about the right things.

Over 1500 years ago, a group of Christians left society and went off to become monks. They did so in response to the marriage of Christianity and empire derived by Constantine. Christianity, they stated, cannot be wed to power as the world understands it...they are not compatible. They would not be 'of their era'. Nor should we, for Christianity and empire have nothing to do with one another...we're about a whole different empire, the Kingdom of God, the beloved community. Maybe what Jesus is saying in the Sermon on the Mount is that we should have our own monk revolution, one where we let our interior lives have exterior manifestation, right where we live, so that we might commit ourselves fully to the formula - do justice, love kindness and walk with God in humility...one step at a time.

AMEN.



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