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“Poetic Prophecy”-Matthew 6:24-34
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Many years ago, the late Peter Gomes, chaplain at Harvard, preached on this Gospel at an exclusive girl’s school in Manhattan. Gomes hoped that Jesus’ invitation not to worry would calm these students who were immersed in such a high pressure, competitive environment. Everything seemed to go pretty well, until afterwards, when an angry parent confronted Gomes and told him that his sermon was all nonsense. Gomes reminded the man that it wasn’t his own message, but Jesus’, that he preached.

“It’s still nonsense,” the father said, “It was anxiety that got my daughter into this school, it was anxiety that kept her here, it was anxiety that got her into college and will keep her there, and it will be anxiety that will get her a good job. You’re selling nonsense.”¹

Talk about an honest critique after a sermon. Even though we know he is clearly the antagonist of that story, we can all relate to the father. Sure, the natural world receives everything it needs from the air, the earth, the rain, and the sun, but that’s not the world we live in, right? In our reality, there are mortgages to pay, grades to uphold, therapy to work on, student debt to pay off, relationships that need maintenance and care, growing children and aging parents to keep healthy and fed, the list goes on and on. On a daily basis, we contort our bodies, minds, time, energy and resources in nearly impossible dimensions just to keep it all together. It’s no wonder we are more stressed, exhausted, and anxious than ever.

-Don’t worry about your life?

-Don’t worry about what I will eat or how I will clothe myself?

-Don’t worry about tomorrow?

Read in our everyday circumstances, this message can sound naive and unrealistic. Candler Professor Tom Long writes that “the notion that we ought to glide through life, thoughtless for the morrow, is certainly no way to cope in a complex, post industrial society, and it is tempting to see Jesus’ words as a lovely, but sentimental impracticality.”²

And that’s just for everyday circumstances. Read under more challenging contexts, this message can sound downright dismissive. The notion that people battling illnesses, living in situations of violence, poverty, famine, war or genocide ought to channel birds and flowers makes me wonder if that father was right after all: maybe Jesus is selling us nonsense.

This text is rich with imagery. Episcopalian pastor Debie Thomas writes that here we meet the “Jesus who stands on a hilltop and invites us to “consider the lilies” and

¹ Peter Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (New York: HarperOne, 2002), 179.

² Tom Long, “Homiletical Perspective on Matthew 6:24-34, Proper 3,” *Feasting on the Word* (), 71.

“behold the birds. Jesus who offers his followers a balm for anxiety in the profusion of wildflowers and the antics of sparrows. Here we find Jesus the poet, the artist, the naturalist, the contemplative.”³

When Jesus describes the splendid symbiosis of creation, he evokes the poetry of the Psalms and we are invited to consider our relationship with all living things.

And with his final exhortation, *“Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow’s trouble will bring worries of its own,”* Jesus evokes the wisdom literature of Proverbs. These rhetorical movements draw our attention away from the frantic pursuit of life’s necessities to a vision of trust in God’s overarching providential care. There is beauty, reassurance, and calm in this poetic wisdom.

Yet, while Jesus could be described as many things, a dreamy poet is not usually one of them. Professor Long writes that *“Jesus...is a prophet and he is preaching a sermon, that he means to be taken seriously.”*⁴

Prophets are harbingers of another way. They issue harsh judgments on people’s behavior and they warn them to repent or face the music. The consequences Ezekiel, Amos, and Jonah warned of were severe: destruction, desolation, death. Not surprisingly, prophets were not popular and they often didn’t help their cause by sharing their messages in bizarre and perplexing ways. But, as Sister Joan Chittester wrote, *“The function of the prophet is not to destroy. The function of the prophet is to expose whatever...fester beneath the surface so that what is loved can be saved while there is yet time.”*⁵

Saving comes through repentance, reformation, and reconciliation with God and requires people to change.

In the beginning of this passage, Jesus invites us to reconsider our relationship to possessions. *“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.”* (Matthew 6:24)

“*Mammon*” is an Aramaic word meaning “money” or “possessions.” On its own, it’s neutral, but in this context, it’s presented as a false god, an idol. This short passage is part of a larger section on possessions in the Sermon on the Mount. There’s ample evidence to suggest that Jesus encouraged his followers to hold lightly to earthly possessions-and to eschew the accumulation and acquisition of wealth. His disciples left their homes, families, vocations, safety and security, to follow an itinerant prophet who preached that it was *“easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”* (Luke 18:25)

³ Debie Thomas, “Jesus the Poet,” *The Christian Century*, September 8, 2021, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/jesus-poet>

⁴ Tom Long, “Homiletical Perspective on Matthew 6:24-34, Proper 3,” *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 69.

⁵ Joan Chittester, “Role of the Prophet,” <https://joanchittester.org/word-from-joan/role-prophet>

We might be tempted to interpret “*mammon*,” as anything that divides our allegiance and distracts us from God. There are certainly many gods other than money that compete for our loyalty: comfort and security, success and approval, self preservation and all manner of things to which we devote considerable attention, energy, time and devotion. We would be right to examine our relationship with **all** of these things.

But here, Jesus invites us to examine our relationship with wealth and possessions-it would be misleading to dilute this message into something metaphorical or more general.

As they shared the gospel, the disciples, and Jesus himself, relied upon the hospitality and generosity of local communities. When they didn’t receive it, they went without. “Even Paul, whose confidence in God was unbounded, often went hungry and without shelter (2 Corinthians 11:27)...what Paul learned from his deprivations was that God was greater than his needs.”⁶

I’m not here to tell you to sell all of your possessions. If I were, I might rightly receive a critique of selling nonsense, just like Gomes did in Manhattan. But discipleship, true discipleship should cost us something. Following Jesus should be consequential-we should feel it, whether it’s stretching the generosity of our stewardship, dedicating our time serving others, risking our reputation by standing up for what is right. Jesus doesn’t just invite us to imagine another reality, he urges us to be that other reality. A reality that is felt in the ways we spend our time, our energy **and** our money.

I can’t tell you what generosity looks like for you. But I am here to invite you to let go of whatever anxiety and worry might be holding you back from being more generous with your time, your talents, and your resources.

In this poetic prophecy, Jesus invites us to hold more lightly to our money and our things, no matter how much or little we have. Trust and confidence in God’s providence doesn’t mean “that all of our material problems will disappear.”⁷ But it can free us from a constant effort to acquire and maintain. In exchange, we can focus our sights on an alternative reality, the kingdom of God.

“*Look at the birds of the air*” and “*consider the lilies of the field*.” New Testament scholar Robert Tannehill points out that these verbs are “exceptionally strong.”⁸ If we really look, we, too, might get a glimpse of that alternative kingdom. A reality in which, Long writes, “*God is a loving parent instead of a distant tyrant, a reality in which the meek are landowners, a reality in which the merciful are the legislators and the peacemakers are the celebrities.*”⁹

⁶ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1993) 75

⁷ *Ibid* 75

⁸ Robert C. Tannehill, *The Sword of His Mouth* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 62-23.

⁹ Tom Long, “Homiletical Perspective on Matthew 6:24-34, Proper 3,” *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 71

From the seat of wealth and comfort, where so many of us find ourselves, this passage is a humbling invitation to reorient our values and priorities to be more in alignment with God's justice and righteousness. From the seat of struggle or scarcity, this passage is a comforting reminder of God's overarching power, providence and love.

No matter where we fall on that spectrum at any given time, remember that this alternative reality, the kingdom of God, isn't the promise of a dreamy poet. It is the promise of the prophetic and powerful, redeemer of all creation who is willing to give his very life for its fulfillment. Amen.