

FIRST THINGS FIRST
Matt 6:25-33
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Jesus is high on a mountainside when he utters these words. There's a large crowd down below, at the bottom – people who are curious about this roving rabbi and in awe of his wisdom. With him there on the side of the mountain is the band of his closest followers, his disciples.

From that mountain Jesus is delivering his most well-known sermon – the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus began his Sermon with the familiar Beatitudes: Blessed are the poor in spirit, ... the meek, ... those who mourn ... the peacemakers ... those who seek after righteousness ... And he ended his sermon with, "The one who hears these words and does them, is like the one who has built his house on a rock – no strength of storm, no flood, no wind will ever tear it down, because it's built on me, the Rock, the Word of God."

The part of the sermon we hear this morning falls right in the middle. They are intense words, firm instruction to the disciples: do not worry, do not worry, do not worry, do not worry. One gets the impression the disciples are worried about something. Jesus says to them, "Look at the flowers, look at the birds – they don't go about gathering, toiling, worrying about their survival, about food or shelter. They go about doing what they were created to do and God provides them their food and the materials for their shelter."

Perhaps the disciples could relate to the way of the lilies and the birds, which go about their day, doing what they are called to do while trusting God to provide for their needs. When Jesus said, "Follow me!" the disciples dropped everything and followed. They left their nets, their families, their system of providing for themselves and their loved ones. Something about Jesus helped them step out in faith and follow with undivided devotion.

But time has passed. Maybe their faith is wavering as what they have done sinks in – how they left behind their means of security. The world again clamors for their attention, begs for their devotion, beckons them to come back, to start gathering again, to store up for the future, to be concerned with sustaining themselves, ensuring their survival and that of their families.

Just before these words in our passage today, Jesus had taught the disciples that it is impossible to serve two masters with equity. "You cannot do it," he says. "You will love one and hate the other; you'll be devoted to one and forget about the other. You cannot serve both God and wealth."

Jesus sees the worry on their faces. Jesus perceives the disciples' devotion to him, to God, but he also sees the worry in their faces and senses their struggle to follow, serve and obey him with an undivided heart. "Do not worry," he says, "because surely your God in heaven knows what you need."

I've acquired a fair number of bibles over the years, especially during my seminary days, and in most of them, this passage is underlined or highlighted and has exclamation marks written all around it. For someone prone to worry, as I am, this passage has comforted many times as I read in it, "Don't worry, God knows, don't worry, God knows." Ok, I get it. But usually the comfort gives way to despair as I realize what so many of us do if we look around, that it's not true! In this earthly kingdom, birds, flowers, people do *not* always get what they need.

- In this world our oil spills destroy our birds, and our pesticides destroy their food.
- In this world we bulldoze fields of flowers to make room for more parking lots.
- In this world people everywhere endure tragedy every day: The job we have today is gone tomorrow. Some cannot make the mortgage. Some end up homeless. Some die in the streets.
- In this world people die of hunger everyday; someone we love is healthy today and diagnosed with a terminal illness tomorrow

"Don't worry," Jesus commands. Yet there is so much to worry about.

Jesus is on that mountain making disciples. Disciples have ministries. Jesus is growing them in their discipleship, their devotion to God, preparing them to go into the world to minister in Christ's name. But as their faith waivers, they revert to worldly cares and are tempted to resume their worldly ministries – the ministry of worry, the ministry of gathering and stockpiling, the ministry of trying to provide for all their needs by their own power.

Jesus preaches words that day that remind the disciples they are powerless to control the world and powerless to provide for their own needs without God because it is God who provides everything in the first place. Jesus words remind them that they are called to *Kingdom-of-God* living, to seeking *God's* will. Christ has called all disciples out of the worldly ministries of worry and fretting and into the ministries God has called and ordained them for before they were born: ministries of healing the sick, comforting the brokenhearted, bringing good news to the poor.

“Consider the lilies”, Jesus says. “And don't worry - God knows. Put first things first. Seek God's will.”

As we really do consider the lilies and the events in the world around us, Christ's promise that God knows what we need is not enough sometimes to keep us from despair or to keep us from fretting and toiling and gathering. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests that it's one thing to hear these words – that God knows what we need – and then another “to proceed about lives not expecting God to act to help us.”

The promise in today's Scripture passage that God knows what we need is not meant to be the sole source of our comfort, not meant to guarantee worry-free lives, and it's not the end of Jesus' sermon. Our hope lies in Christ's command at the end of the passage: Strive first for the kingdom of God, the righteousness of God, the *will* of God, and all these things will be given to you.

When we put first things first, and seek the God's Kingdom, God's will, each day, we still won't find all the answers regarding the trouble in the world, or why there are so many things that cause us to worry, or why we are prone to worry in the first place. But in our seeking after God, we draw near to the one who does have answers. When we seek God – the one who knows what we need - we discover that God has already given us everything we need in Jesus Christ.

Bonhoeffer says, “If Christ has been given us, if we are called to his discipleship we are given all things, literally ALL Things.” Bonhoeffer echoes the Apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15 that God in Christ is our “all in all” – everything we need. It is the resurrected Christ who has conquered death for us all. It is the Spirit of Christ that God has given us, that lives within us, that empowers us to put our faith in God and to further Christ's ministry of reconciliation that we've inherited from him. It is Christ who promises he is coming again to make all things new. It is Christ who offers us a peace beyond all human understanding.

The call to follow Christ is a costly. The call to seek God's will first and thereby receive “ALL things” in Christ is not cheap. It costs us our devotion to the little gods in our lives – the gods of the world that cannot sustain us, cannot liberate us and do not love us: the gods of our worry, the gods of our anxious gathering and storing up to secure our lives today and a nest-egg for the future, the gods of our trying to control everything and everyone. The call to Christian discipleship is a call to sacrifice our worldly and strive to put First things First – the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness.

I have a friend who sets his alarm clock every day for 6:33am. When the alarm goes off, whether it wakes him from sleep or finds him already engaged in his day, he pauses, looks at the “6:33” on the clock and remembers Christ's words in Matthew chapter 6 verse 33 which call him to put First things First. And then he prays, “God help me seek first your Kingdom, your Righteousness, your will, and thank you for your promise that everything else will fall into place, through your son Jesus. Amen.”

This Thanksgiving week, as we remember all we have to be thankful for, thanks be to God for the gift of Jesus Christ, our “all in all”, who paid the price for our sin, reconciles us to God and invites us, in freedom and in faith, to become disciples, devoted to the one Lord who knows what we need. In the name of our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer – our God who is one, and “there is no other.”