

Marion weekly update

JUNE 26, 2022

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



SERMON June 19, Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6:19-34

This week we continue our series on the Sermon on the Mount. As much as every the notions we've noticed about these teachings are very front and center. The first is remember that this is delivered in a very cultural context. An observant Jew is teaching other observant Jews in the context of the old covenant and the Law because the new covenant of grace has yet to be established. Jesus is explaining the intent over the letter of the law to help them have a stronger and deeper faith that is lived out correctly before God. This culture will come into play when we talk about worry.

The passage today also illustrates without question that Jesus pairs things together for greater impact. We've seen this the past weeks and today it is outright explicit revealed by one word. That word is "therefore".

This is too often overlooked and so these passages are treated as stand alone rather than informing one another. Whenever we see this word "therefore" it is a clue to make sure we're paying attention not only to what comes next but to what comes before. They are connected with intent. And so to separate them is to intentionally miss a larger point being revealed.

We'll begin with "storing up treasure". The basic sense here is that focusing on accumulating wealth in this world is senseless. Wealth collected here is passing. It can be stolen, lost, destroyed, and certainly none of us can take it with us when we die. Rather focus on building reward in heaven because it will last eternally. The issue at hand here is that if this is seen as the core of the passage we grossly miss something that has been a consistent theme through the sermon so far. It's about the heart.

In fact, Jesus is specific about it when He talks about "where your heart lies".

If we focus on "accumulating", it's still accumulating. Accumulation is a self-serving prospect. When we act in keeping with God's desire for us, to have our primary reason be to "build up treasure", even if it's in heaven, has our heart in the wrong place. We act in service to God and one another not out of selfish pursuit, but out of genuine love. To act this way with wealth, even heavenly wealth, is likely to actually accumulate nothing at all. Intent matters, and if my intent is all about me, what I'm doing isn't likely to please God at all.

His sense that "where your treasure is your heart will be" I believe is better understood with where your heart is your treasure will lie. Similar but different. The thrust here is to keep our hearts focused heavenward, but as we see we can think it's focused heavenward trying to amass wealth there and in the process lose the very things we're trying to get. And perhaps lose even more than that if our soul isn't right before God.

Jesus' point is to get our hearts and minds concerned with living rightly before God. Obsession with wealth will lead us away from God every time. When we want more and more, it's about getting not giving. It's about being served not serving. It's about getting mine even at the expense of taking yours or you not having enough. "You can't serve two masters for you'll hate one and love the other."

To serve God is to have our focus on loving the other. Jesus has literally just given voice to this when He speaks about helping those in need. The virtues of the beatitudes are all about loving each other and loving God. None of it drives at selfish ambition or amassing material wealth. It isn't that serving God means we don't have wealth. Let's not be mistaken. It means that our ambition is to do and live for God, not the wealth we can gather.

Certainly there are amazing people of faith whose skills and natural affinities acquire wealth. The larger question is what is done with that wealth. Is it about how we can build God's Kingdom, or how we can build and indulge our own? Speaking about our eyes and what they take in is one key to helping us keep our priorities straight. Do we indulge and engage those messages in the world that push us to always outdo one another? Do we embrace the need to always have more and that the better we have than others the better we are than others? Do we buy the idea that our worth is tied to our wealth? These are the things that conjure darkness. On the other hand taking in messages of grace, love, compassion, and faith push us the other way. They push towards God, and God is continually reaching towards us drawing us to Godself.

How does this connect then to worry?

What happens when we obsess about having enough? It's a formula for constant worry. What could take what I have away? Is what I have enough? Do I measure up to those around me? With any material possession, food and clothing included, how do I hang on to what I have and make sure it can't be taken away? This obsession leads to self-absorption. It leads to worry. That worry is what drives us to whatever lengths to make sure we keep accumulating, and some of those efforts, as well as intentions, stand well outside the will of God.

Worry can drive us easily to panic, which leads to rash action and obsessing about our own concerns rather than being about the business God has for us to accomplish. Our choices become driven by the worry above and beyond our faith. This idea of worry is a tricky one. For most of us worrying is part of our nature. It hits us to different degrees, but most of us have worry of some sort. We may label it concern or something nagging at us. In many ways all of it is pretty similar. So while Jesus is saying not to worry, we have to acknowledge that at some point all of us are going to have to struggle with the condition. In all likelihood, some of us gathered here this morning have a worry on the mind right now. So be gracious with yourself. Some other ideas about this condition may also be helpful to dial in on what Jesus is saying here.

Present in this sense of not worrying we have to consider the culture Jesus is speaking into. It is a culture wildly different from our own. Think about the admonition He's just given them around treating people in need. "Help them. Period." Consider the beatitudes. They are all about relationship with God and one another. Love God, love each other. Think about the Old Testament and the book of Ruth. There was expectation when they harvested their crops that they would "leave the gleanings behind". The missed crop or what fell to the ground was intentionally let go so that behind the workers, those in need of food could come and pick to have something to eat.

The elderly if family did what they were required to do had their later life care taken care of by their children. This is part of the heart of the command to honor mother and father that it may go well with them and enjoy a long life. Honoring mom and dad meant that when they couldn't provide for themselves, the children

There were built in cultural and religious expectations within the community Jesus was engaging to provide. This isn't necessarily our culture at all. Yes, there are social services available and food banks if you can access them. There are mechanisms in place, but they aren't cultural and religious mandates. Availability to meet these needs is only as available as those in need are aware of them, able to get to them, and then able to access them. For many without a helping hand they can't. For many there is no helping hand either willing or able.

Telling a homeless person who has lost their job and has children not to worry about what to eat will likely fall in very deaf ears unless there's something else following it up. What does this look like?

This leads us to a difference between worry and preparation/responsibility.

The passage on worry has been misused in many ways. In the office this week we talked a bit about how to the extreme there are those who will say that insurance, or savings accounts, or retirement plans violate the instruction not to worry. These things are the result of worrying we might get sick, or that we may lose our job, or that we won't be prepared for retirement.

These things are not worry but rather preparing and taking responsibility for our lives. Not worrying isn't merely the product of trusting God. As we've seen, so much of meeting needs has to do with the partnering of us and God. We talk to God, rely on God for direction and strength, but we also have to participate in our own journey.

Think about employment. Having a job isn't worry because we're concerned that we need groceries and have rent to pay. It's productivity, calling, contribution, and yes, preparation to make provision for the things that we need.

This idea of preparation and responsibility goes hand in hand with working through or minimizing the worry in our hearts and minds. When something bad or tragic befalls us, part of managing worry is doing something about it. What are the resources that can help us? Where and to whom can we turn for aid? Part of this journey is being humble and vulnerable enough to ask for that help. And again, where obsession with wealth gets in the way. Too often the more that is amassed the greater the temptation to be prideful. Should something go significantly wrong, that pride can contribute to frightening worry because there is no willingness to reach out.

Unfortunately, it's entirely possible that someone can strive to do something about their circumstance, even do everything they are able, and come up empty. When this is the case there is clearly a deficit of grace in the society.

There is also another side of responsibility. It falls to those with the means to be of assistance to those in need. Something we forget is that alleviating worry is something we can help one another with. The early church in Acts had this down well. They shared and shared alike so that everyone had what they needed. In looking out for one another they very much took a lot of unnecessary worry out of the equation.

As we noted last week, if we forward to Matthew 25, we see that yes, we do have a responsibility for one another. When Cain killed Abel and Cain asked "am I my brother's keeper?" the resounding answer was YES! Looking out for one another is a very God, very Jesus thing to do. We ignore it at our peril. One day we may be on the end that needs a helping hand.

Looking at this idea of how we perceive wealth and worry is certainly much more complicated than we sometimes give credit for. Human nature comes into it. Culture plays a role. Circumstances out of our control are a factor. It's not cookie cutter theology. But there is one base reality that I believe holds true.

"Seek first the kingdom and God's righteousness." Seeking the Kingdom isn't merely about praying and reading and worshipping. Seeking the Kingdom is about participating in building it intentionally here in the world. This requires honest, practical devotion not just to knowing God but letting the knowing transform and translate into acts of mercy, grace, and kindness that change the world around us.

Whatever concerns are with us today, they may be with us tomorrow. So we do the best we can with what's in front of us at the moment knowing that tomorrow if it doesn't work out we get another crack at it.

What lets us be at peace, and helps alleviate some of the worry, is knowing that how we've tackled today is in keeping with God's desires. If we lay our head down on a pillow at a posh hotel or on a rock under a bridge, we know that at least for the day behind us we've done the best we could. And that some days is enough. Some days it HAS to be enough. So how do we tackle today? With integrity, love, and compassion. With Kingdom building spirit. By engaging whatever circumstances we find ourselves in with a combination of tenacity and grace. Trusting that just as God is guiding our hearts and steps, God is also guiding the hearts and steps of others whose paths we cross.

The goal isn't affluence and influence. It's not to have a worry free life. It's to simply love God and one another. It's to uplift and support one another through the hardships and victories of life. It's the give and take of knowing that the grace extended to another will very likely one day be grace received from that same person. Even in the midst of harsh reality we can find peace.

Remember the hymn "It Is Well With My Soul". Even when the seas are rough and terrifying, it can still be well with our soul. This is the peace that carries us through the circumstance and the worry. It's the peace that keeps us tightly tethered to God no matter what comes, and helps us to be grateful for God's presence in our hearts when we emerge on the other side of whatever is causing the blip in life at the moment.