

Money.worries@YHWH.net - Sermon Based on Matthew 6:24-34

by David Hindman on Sunday, February 27, 2011

OK, tell the truth. If you weren't in church listening to those words and if they weren't coming from Jesus, I suspect most of us would hear them and go, "Yeh, right! In a world of high unemployment and uncertain markets and mortgages under water, don't worry!? You're kidding me!" Or if we were channel surfing and we heard someone besides Jesus say that we can trust God to provide us with our basic necessities, like food and clothing and shelter, I suspect many of us would listen slack jawed and ask "What planet is that nut case from? Hasn't he seen the statistics about thousands dying from hunger every day? Has he driven through any American city to see the thousands of homeless on our streets? If I didn't know better, I would think this guy's as goofy as *Mad* magazine's Alfred E. Newman with his ridiculous attitude of "What!? Me worry!?"

It wasn't any easier for Jesus' first hearers to swallow this, either. Grinding poverty was the rule for the vast majority of Jesus' listeners. Although it was the bread basket of the region, as much as 40% of the population of Galilee faced famine and starvation every year as the taxes they paid with food they produced allowed the elites and powerful to thrive. Even though many children were born to families, many if not most children died before reaching the age of five. So it is no abstract or idle question Jesus asks his hearers about whether God is trustworthy and reliable to provide what we need. Most of his hearers lived hand to mouth, one day at a time, so it is a sincere prayer Jesus teaches when he instructs his hearers to pray for daily bread. It is too greedy to ask for more. It is true reality to know that if bread will be provided, it will be by the grace of God.

But this is something I appreciate about Jesus. He is not telling others to do something he hasn't already done himself. In all likelihood, Jesus himself grew up poor and always on the edge of economic disaster. When he is born and his parents go to Jerusalem to make offerings of gratitude to God for the gift of this child, they offer two pigeons – the offering expected from the poor, not the well-to-do. When I grew up I always assumed Jesus was a nice middle class Jewish boy with a hard working carpenter craftsman for his dad. But it is more likely that Jesus' family is so poor that they have already lost the most prized possession a Jew could own – their land, and now Joseph is reduced to working with his hands for someone else, perhaps as a craftsman but just as likely as a day laborer eking out an existence day by day by day. Unlike some evangelists today on TV or elsewhere, Jesus doesn't teach others to trust radically in God's care and God's ability to provide daily needs and then get into his stretch chariot and go to the local five star inn for dinner after taking up a love offering from his hearers. Jesus knows the troubles these folks see; they are his troubles as well. And still he urges them not to worry and to trust God and not to become drawn to the Siren song of money making more promises than it can deliver.

And even though our temptation is not to take him seriously or to blow him off or to blow him a strawberry and get on with our lives and to be serious about serious things, apparently Jesus is dead serious. Or better put, he is vividly serious, because he believes these wise words are words of wisdom and life. And of course he is right. We may think of Jesus in many ways – teacher, prophet, miracle worker, and healer. We may not so quickly think of his as a wise man or a guru. But here he is. In the Bible, a wise man or a sage typically looks at every day life thinks about what he sees in nature or human relations and draws conclusions from those

observations. So in today's lesson we are hearing Guru Jesus as he invites us to look at wildflowers and birds and to think about what they teach us about the God who cares for them and us. And Guru Jesus makes these one sentence statements intended to make us think about basic truths we might otherwise miss. You can't serve God and Money. Divided loyalties simply do not work. It's kind of like a friend of mine who was doing pre-marital counseling with a couple. He asked them what they thought would be different in their lives once they married and what would be different. The woman was stunned with her husband to be said, "Well I expect to still be able to date on weekends." And he was deadly serious. And understandably she called off the wedding because it was either her or his dates, but not both. I also remember a couple I counseled who I knew were tragically in trouble before they said their vows when the man said to his soon to be wife, "Honey, I love you but if I have to choose between you and my job, my job has to come first." Divided loyalties are death, and Jesus knows that we will either let our lives be ruled by God, or we will let our stuff and our possession and our portfolio and our desire for wealth rule our lives.

And although worrying is an understandable reaction to stressful and challenging situations that seem beyond our control, worry does us absolutely no good. Worrying produces nothing but heartburn and sleepless nights. Worry never ever solved a problem or put food on a table or clothes on a back. It never added an inch to a short person's height, much less the 18 inches Jesus challenges us to grow by our worry. And worry is a huge theological question. It is a crucial faith matter. Because worry suggests that God really is not reliable and is not trustworthy and if anything good is going to happen in my life, I better not count of God having

anything to do with it. Ultimately, worry is a subtle form of atheism at worst, or at best a fearful lack of trust that God is able to save and to act.

Now I confess readily that I know all this stuff in my head, but not always in my heart. Again and again in my life I have invited people to trust their lives to God and not to get stuck on the Tar Baby of worry, but even I, your wonderful preacher, can fall victim to worry and doubt. So as with most of my sermons, I am preaching as much to me as to you. I say these things not to lead any of us to feel guilty, but to help be honest about hard following Jesus really is, and how challenging it is to take him seriously.

But his ways are truth and life. Once each month I go to Hanover Manor to celebrate Holy Communion with the residents, and most times I use the same scripture with them I will use with you the following Sunday. Last week I read this scripture and asked these older adults to share some of their wisdom in response to Jesus' words. They agreed that worrying was a dead end street. One man said that he had learned that if he prayed instead of worrying it was a better use of his time. One lady wisely said that if she prayed instead of worrying sometimes God gave her the guidance she needed to deal with the problem she was facing. Maybe Jesus is wiser than we think. Maybe his word is truth and worth heeding.

And maybe the problem isn't with the generosity and grace of God but our selfishness. There is more than enough food to feed the world's mouths, but because of selfishness and unjust distribution, some of us are wearing fat pants and others are walking skeletons. God is gracious and generous; perhaps we are being called to be the means of God's grace to be provided so everyone has enough to eat and shelter is there for all and no one's clothing has to

be their birthday suit. God is good; perhaps Jesus is challenging us to be as good as the God we serve?

Last week I was listening to Marketplace, and business news show on National Public Radio. The focus was on a guy who goes around the country teaching children to save. He says that if we don't teach our children to save before they enter middle school; it is even harder to convince them of the value of savings. His strategy is to challenge children to save 10 cents out of every dollar. The children get it – 10 cents really isn't that much and instead of money ruling their lives they can use money to help their dreams come true.

There are several lessons for us here, too. Parents, I urge you to begin now teaching your children to tithe – it is so easy to tithe 10 cents of every dollar and to get into that habit so when the kids are grown and they are making 100 grand it will seem natural to put 10 grand to God's good purposes and to achieve God's dreams. You see, I think God's dream of a world free of hunger and poverty, a world where everyone has enough and no one has too much, a world in which treatable diseases get treated and everyone has shelter from the cold, is a wonderful dream we can share, too. Instead of being ruled by our money, perhaps God is calling us to use our money to make these dreams come true as well. God will give us the resources to make that happen. In fact I believe God is already doing that. In the words of those great prophets of old, The Rolling Stones, with God you don't always get what you want, but you do always get what you need. May we trust and believe that with all our hearts, and be the hands and heart of God so all can come to know and trust that God does indeed provide for all God's children. Thanks be to God!