

Matthew 6: 24-34

HOW MUCH MORE!

A week or two after our oldest son was diagnosed with cancer, I decided to take our dog on a walk for I was in need of some therapy. As I was walking down our neighbor's cart path to get to the golf course, I was crying and pleading with God for a sign, any kind of sign to let me know that Andrew was going to be okay and that we would somehow get through this horrible nightmare.

When I got to the bottom of the hill, I stopped crying, took a deep breath, and I prayed, "Lord, it's not right to ask you for a sign. What I ask for instead is that you will help me to trust you. I don't know how this is going to turn out with Andrew, but most of all, help us to know that you are with us and will uphold us." That prayer was better; it felt right; and, I knew it was a more faithful response than the first prayer.

Right after I prayed that amended prayer, I looked up and I saw a flash of brilliant blue in the sunlight as a bluebird flew nearby. Then, I walked about fifty feet and I came upon a purple golf ball. I have found over five thousand golf balls on that golf course; many of the balls have various logos and they come in a variety of colors. But, I have never found a purple golf ball before or since that one time. First, there was the bluebird and then the purple golf ball. I looked up to the heavens and said, "Thanks, Lord, for the two signs. They really weren't necessary after all, but I'll take them!"

I share that personal story with you in the hope that perhaps you can identify with it and see yourself in that same struggle of trusting and not trusting. As I reflect on that experience, I can now see that what I wanted was to be in control. I wanted to call the shots and tell God what I needed God to do for me. However, as soon as I prayed that first prayer, I knew I didn't feel right about it. Something was wrong. I realized that it was more important that I put my trust in God instead of myself, to give up trying to control the situation and acknowledge that God was in control and God would provide.

That opening story, along with my reflections on that particular event, serves to introduce the Gospel lesson for today. It helps to remember that this scripture lesson is part of a greater whole found within Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Furthermore, these words of our Lord are not addressed to the crowds but to his disciples. Jesus is instructing those who follow him what citizenship in the kingdom of God looks like. To be sure, it is not an easy path to follow, and yet, it is the pathway that leads us into deeper communion with the Lord our God and with one another. In following Jesus, we move far beyond mere existence to live life on purpose, which, in turn, leads to a more fulfilled and joyous life in the long run.

To get from here to there, we have to acknowledge and act accordingly on Jesus' main point that we cannot serve two masters; we cannot bow before both God and wealth. We have to choose one over the other because we are presented with an either/or choice; we can't have a both/and kind of deal. Our wealth, our property, our possessions are not necessarily evil in and

of themselves. After all, our money is neutral; it's neither good nor bad. It's not money that is the root of all evil; rather, it is the love of money that is the root of all evil. And, therein lies the problem.

While our wealth can be used in many positive ways, at the same time, our wealth can get us sidetracked; it can easily become a distraction that turns our attention away from God. The more "stuff" we accumulate for ourselves, greater is the temptation to no longer focus on and trust in God or depend upon God. The more independent we become of God and others, we are lured into thinking that we must be in control, that our security is really up to us. All too subtly, our possessions can possess us and control us and lead us farther from the Lord our God. In turn, our wealth leads us to a false sense of security and we begin to wonder and worry if we have enough money to cover our needs and all of our wants.

R. Scott Sullender points out that Jesus' teaching about worry comes immediately after his teaching about wealth; in fact, the two topics are connected by "therefore" in verse 25. In the absence of faith in God, the chief symptom of which is "anxiety," we are tempted to substitute trust in wealth. Wealth, or more precisely the love of wealth, can consume our energy, time, and loyalty taking away from our devotion to God. For Jesus, God and wealth are competing for our worship, our loyalty, and our faith. It is as simple as that: a choice, "Whom will you serve?" We can come to believe that wealth can protect us better than God can. With our wealth, we try to control issues that are God's to control, like health, life, and death. The more we are consumed by wealth, the more anxious we become. Wealth promises us security but gives us anxiety. The more we believe that wealth equates with happiness, the more we will worry. And, we are tempted to measure our worth by what we own or by how we look to others.

Jesus reminds us that our identity and our worth are more appropriately measured by our participation in the Kingdom of God. We are defined more by our place in the Kingdom as the beloved children of God than by what we do or have or how we look. Thus, Jesus calls us back to center by suggesting that our wealth, which subsequently leads to worries, is a matter of misplaced priorities. Instead, we should strive to live with God's kingdom as our main focus and trust that God will provide for us.

To drive home his point to trust in God instead of our anxiety-producing wealth, Jesus exhorts us to look at the birds of the air; they do not sow, reap or gather into barns, "and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. Will God not much more clothe you?" And, of course, the answer to these rhetorical questions is an emphatic "Yes!" Why? Because of how much more God loves us, who are created in God's own image. God values all of creation and calls it good, but God looks upon human beings with extra love and favor. Remember how the psalmist looks with joy and wonder at the majesty of God's good creation. And then, he remarks, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor" (Psalm 8:4-5).

If God cares about and takes care of the birds of the air and the lilies in the field (and God

certainly does!), then we can be assured of how much more God can and will provide for us today and in the days to come. Listen to the creative way in which Eugene Peterson translates the latter portion of the lesson for today: “If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers, don’t you think he’ll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you? What I’m trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with getting, so you can respond to God’s giving. People who don’t know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don’t worry about missing out. You’ll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don’t get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.” (The Message, page 1756)

In my office here at the church, there hangs a plaque that some dear friends gave me during the time of our son’s illness. I look up from my desk and I read that plaque at least several times a day. I not only read it; I believe it and take it to heart. The plaque gets right to the point of the scripture lesson for today. It states quite poignantly: “Don’t worry about tomorrow, God is already there...”

That really is the truth of the matter! And, how much more can we have peace within ourselves if and when we trust God and trust that that good news really is true for us? In our better moments, we choose to serve God and, when we do, we discover a calm in our innermost beings. Anxiety is pushed aside by a deep and abiding trust in God, knowing that God really does love us and will care for us and provide for our needs.

Once again, I became acutely aware of how God truly provides for our needs given the events of this past week. A week ago, on Saturday afternoon, I was at the Presbytery of the Peaks’ meeting. It was about 4:15 p.m., and we had another five or ten minutes left on the agenda. My cell phone vibrated and I saw my daughter’s name in the cell window. I didn’t answer the call but I showed Jenny my cell phone where Laura’s name appeared, and I whispered, “I wonder if this is the call that we’ve been waiting for?” A few minutes later, my cell phone vibrated; Monica was calling. Once again, I didn’t answer the phone but I was fairly certain they weren’t calling to ask me to pick up a loaf of bread on the way home. As soon as the meeting was over, I quickly went outside and called home. Laura and Monica were heading to UVA Hospital in Charlottesville!

I met them at the hospital that night, and the next morning Laura was taken to surgery to receive her new pancreas. While you were here in worship, the surgeon and his team were finishing up and Laura was headed to the recovery room. By mid-afternoon, her newly transplanted pancreas (along with her cousin’s donated kidney) was working beautifully. We marveled at the medical miracle before us as Laura’s blood sugar readings were and remain within an acceptable range. Laura has not taken insulin for the very first time since January of 1986; the thousands upon thousands of insulin injections over the past twenty-five years have come to an end for her and she has a new lease on life.

I am humbled and overwhelmed when I think of how the Lord has provided for Laura

and all of us who love her. As I reflect on the events of this past week, I am aware that it wasn't coincidence but God's providence at work. First of all, Jenny had been scheduled to preach last Sunday over two months ago; thus, I was free to go without any delays. The Lord provided Laura with a gifted and caring surgeon and transplant team, and we continue to appreciate all of the doctors and nurses and aides, who have cared for Laura. We don't know a single thing about the donor other than the fact that he/she had died and that he/she willed for his/her organs to be harvested so that others (including our daughter) could live and live well! How can we ever be grateful enough? I don't think we can but I do know that I, in turn, am signed up to be an organ donor and perhaps the Lord will use what I can pass on in order to provide for someone else.

And, it goes without saying that the Lord has provided for Laura and our family through the prayers of the saints, which includes all of you. What a blessing it is to know that you pray for us, walk with us, waited for this moment to occur, and now rejoice with us. We have held up well through this long ordeal because the Lord gave us strength and you were there for us and with us.

Again and again, the Lord does and will provide for us in so many different ways. The more we recognize that fact, the more we will serve only the Lord and trust in God alone (in place of our wealth) to provide us with our daily "bread" and tomorrow's needs. Therefore, let us strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to us as well. In light of all that the Lord our God has done for us, is doing in our midst, and will provide for us in the future, how much more should we love and serve the Lord? How much more indeed should we give glory, honor, and praise to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Amen.

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