

Psalm 131  
Matthew 6:24-34

#### REMEMBER: FIRST THINGS FIRST

I came across this true story, which was told by Michael A. Turner, and I share it with you in the hope that it will both inform and serve to move the sermon forward. Michael Turner writes: When I was in college, I worked three jobs. I wanted to save my parents from the burden of spending money they didn't have on my pricey undergraduate education. Besides, I knew that I also wanted to go to divinity school. I studied, worked and saved. When the time came to graduate and go to divinity school, I was surprised to learn that much of it would be paid for by scholarships, but I needed a way to get there. The car I had been driving died. So, I took the money I had saved for four years from my three jobs and bought a brand new Honda Civic.

I was proud. I washed it every week. When the time came to start divinity school I packed it full of stuff and moved to Durham, NC into a neighborhood called Duke Manor. Duke Manor may sound like a ritzy place to live, but it wasn't. It was actually pretty rough. The week after I moved in, the building next to mine was raided. It was the largest heroine bust in Durham history. There were always rumors circulating about cars being vandalized, broken into, or stolen altogether. I parked mine right under my bedroom window to keep tabs on it. Occasionally, I'd walk by the window and peer out. Every time there was a noise in the parking lot, I'd sit straight up in bed and do some quick surveillance of the parking lot. There was constant noise in the parking lot.

After several restless nights, exhaustion set in and I said to the Lord, "Lord, I can't keep this up. I came here to divinity school to grow in my faith, draw closer to you, learn your scriptures, and learn how to be a leader in your church. I spend all hours of the day in class and studying and then I'm awakened all hours of the night worried about my car in this rough neighborhood. Something's got to give." After a short pause, the Lord replied, "Yes, Yes, it does." (Pulpit Resource, Vol. 36, No. 2, p. 36)

That story provides a nice segue to the scripture lesson from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus told his disciples and other would-be followers that they could not serve two masters at the same time. The choice is still the same today - One or the other. We can serve either God or wealth and our possessions, but we cannot serve both for each one demands too much of us. Instead, we are called to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Jesus insists on "first things first." Disciples are to give undivided attention to God!

The "stuff" which accumulates in our homes, bank accounts, and portfolios are not bad in and of themselves; wealth and other valuables, which surround us, can certainly be used for good - to help others, to provide for retirement, to enjoy and enhance life, and so on. However, those same items can easily become distractions that turn our attention away from God. In fact, the more we accumulate, the temptation grows to no longer focus on and trust in God or depend upon God. Rather, we are lured into thinking that we must be in control, that our security is really all up to us. If we are not careful, subtly and all too quickly, our possessions can possess us and control us. The things in our lives can consume our waking moments and, just like Michael Turner's brand new car parked in a rough neighborhood, something's got to give!

That's why Jesus tells his disciples in every age and place to serve God and God alone. Service to God is first and foremost. When our priorities are arranged accordingly, where God is at the top of the list, everything else will fall into place. "Therefore," Jesus tells his disciples, "do not worry about your life."

Bobby McFerrin had a pop song some years ago entitled, Don't Worry, Be Happy. We wish it could be that simple - that we could just sing a song, snap our fingers, and - poof! - just like that, our worries would be banished from our lives. But it doesn't work that way at all in real life. In fact, if someone says to us, "Don't worry," it's usually not helpful; it's frustrating. We think that they don't really understand

what we're going through, they haven't walked in our shoes; they are out of touch with our particular situation. Why then, did Jesus tell his audience, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink or wear" – what's up with that? What's going on here?

It helps to know the context in which these words were first spoken and recorded. This text is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which took place shortly after Jesus began his ministry and called his first disciples. The twelve and other followers, who crowded around Jesus, had left their homes, families, and jobs to learn from Jesus. Likewise, Matthew's first century audience lived in an unstable time; their security was not a given; persecution and even death were strong possibilities. Naturally, these disciples were truly concerned about their security and survival. They were anxious and in need of reassurance. While our circumstances are drastically different than theirs, we can relate to the extent that we too live in a time of anxiety and uncertainty. We too worry our way through life. We even worry ourselves sick!

In telling his disciples, "Do not worry about your life," Jesus was bringing them back to center. Worry leads us off on a tangent, away from God. As was said earlier, worry about things (or the lack of things) causes us to be distracted; we lose our focus on God. We tend to forget that God is in control, God has it covered. Our worries kidnap us and hold us hostage. Therefore, Jesus called to mind the birds of the air, how they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet, the heavenly Father feeds them. Or, consider the lilies of the field; they neither toil nor spin, and yet, their beauty far outshines King Solomon in all his glory. Jesus asked, "Are you not of more value than the birds? If God clothes the lilies in beauty, how much more will God clothe you?"

In every age, Jesus calls his disciples to look around, take stock, and notice where and how God is active in the world. God is God, which means that God created us, God cares about us, God is in control of the situations we find ourselves in, and God will creatively provide for our needs (as well as some of our wants!). One of the ways we overcome worry is to remember Who God is and what God has done in our lives in the past, and then trust that God will provide a way through the uncertainty that leads to our worries and anxieties. After all, "Trust and worry can't live in the same house." Why worry? We are in God's trustworthy and capable hands, or as Tom Long says it, "Whatever tomorrow brings, it brings God with it."

I have to confess the irony surrounding this sermon. Last week, I was worried because my busy schedule had crowded out proper reading and reflection time on this sermon. I was anxious about what to say in this message because I felt tired, which clouded my thinking. One night this past week, I read and studied for a couple of hours and then fell exhausted into the bed. I don't know if I had a dream or if I were in a semi-conscious state but in the middle of the night, I heard a voice (that I understood to be the Voice of God) say to me, "Just tell them what you know to be true based on your own experience." The next morning as I walked our dog, Toby, ideas came to me and I wrote them down as soon as we got back home. Here's what I know to be true.

As I think back over my past, I remember how many times God has been there for me and has provided for me. There were times when I worried a great deal because I couldn't see a solution to a problem and I feared the worst. I wanted to be in control of the situation but I wasn't because the problem was bigger than my resources. I was consumed by anxiety; and yet, in my better moments, I tried to practice what I believe and preach that God is in control and God is always with us and for us. Since, this is the very same God that created, sustains, and provides for the birds and the lilies, how much more will God care for us? This is the same God, who brought Israel out of Egypt and delivered them into the land promised them. This is the same God who raised Jesus from the dead, and thus, can open up new possibilities where before there were only perceived dead-ends. This is the same God, Who came as Spirit at Pentecost and set fire to the disciples so that they went out into the world ablaze with the good news. This is the same God, who is with us and who will provide for us as well.

Several years ago, our family's secure world was shaken to the core by our oldest son's diagnosis of cancer. I have never known such worry, anxiety, and fear as we experienced in those early, dark days.

But here it is three years later and Andrew's health has improved greatly. I remember those same days back then, but I now see them from a different perspective. When I was fearful that our son could die due to the advance stage and spread of the cancer, God reassured me that, in baptism, Andrew belonged to God in life and in death and beyond. No matter what happened, God would always and forever be with God's beloved child, Andrew, and with our family and help us through whatever came to pass.

Because Andrew was unable to work full-time for over two years, Monica and I helped him with most of his monthly bills. I remember many sleepless nights, pacing the floor and worrying about whether we were going to lose our house because of the financial strain we were under to help our son. Gradually, it dawned on me. So what if we have to sell our home and move into a smaller house or even an apartment. God will still provide us with a place to live. And even more, our relationship with our son is so much more important to us than a material possession. We have always had enough – just like God providing enough daily manna, quail, and water for the Israelites in the wilderness. And, through it all, God has always given us enough strength for each day to cope with the ups and downs of this horrible disease, which many of you know from first-hand experience as well. And, I have told you this before, but I will say it again: one of the significant ways God has provided for us during Andrew's illness is through you by way of your prayers, your love, and your many acts of kindness and charity. We are indeed grateful!

This is what I remember and know to be true. This is why Jesus tells us to put "first things first" and give whole-hearted attention and devotion to God, and God alone! Wealth and possessions can't solve all the problems we face in this life, and they can deceive us with the illusion that we are in control. However, when illness interrupts or death intrudes, do we turn to the almighty dollar or Almighty God? Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

On the mantle of an old English wayside inn is carved this motto: "Fear knocked at the door, faith answered, no one was there." It is human nature to worry about things we cannot control. But, as we begin to worry, let us pause to remember God's past actions and passion for us. Let us put first things first – namely God and nothing else. And, let us trust that somehow God will make a way in our wilderness and lead us into the land of peace and promise. God will act on our behalf; we will do what we can to help the situation; and eventually God's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven – to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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