

Live without Worry
Matthew 6:19-34
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There are many delightful legends and stories recorded of St. Francis of Assisi. One of the most delightful is his Sermon to the Birds.

While travelling with some companions, Francis noticed a great multitude of birds in the trees. Surprised to see so many birds together, he told his companions, "Wait for me here by the way, while I go and preach to my little sisters the birds." This is the sermon he is reported to have preached:

My little sisters the birds, ye owe much to God, your Creator, and ye ought to sing his praise at all times and in all places, because he has given you liberty to fly about into all places; and though ye neither spin nor sew, he has given you a twofold and a threefold clothing for yourselves and for your offspring. Two of all your species he sent into the Ark with Noah that you might not be lost to the world; besides which, he feeds you, though ye neither sow nor reap. He has given you fountains and rivers to quench your thirst, mountains and valleys in which to take refuge, and trees in which to build your nests; so that your Creator loves you much, having thus favoured you with such bounties. Beware, my little sisters, of the sin of ingratitude, and study always to give praise to God.

This story rests in today's gospel reading; Jesus says, "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Parent feeds them." Jesus is assuring us that we can trust in God to provide for us, because we can witness God's provision for the birds. St. Francis, following Jesus, delights in God's provision and reminds his sister birds to join in praise and thanks to God. According to the rest of the story, once Francis had preached this word to them, the birds flew away singing.

Jesus' statement about the birds comes in the midst of this section of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus in which he preaches about wealth and money and the things that we value. Jesus doesn't talk solely about money and wealth and economics; he preaches about all the things we might treasure. My friend and colleague Robin Meyers boiled it down by using a phrase of the theologian Paul Tillich, "This has to do with 'ultimate concern.' Whatever becomes your ultimate concern *is* your god."

Today, then, we are going to explore this topic – What is our ultimate concern? What do we value most? And we'll discover that how we approach those questions affects our worries and anxieties.

How we handle our possessions and our wealth is a significant part of today's Gospel.

Throughout our Christian history, different people have listened to Jesus' economic teaching and applied it different ways. St. Francis, himself, renounced all possessions, not even counting clothing as a belonging. Few have taken *that* position, but many have interpreted the passage as recommending that Christians live more simply and with some distance and detachment from the economic status quo. How simply to live or how much distance to take has, of course, varied.

In the Christian tradition there is a skepticism of wealth; a concern that our possessions could end up possessing us. Clement of Alexandria warned that "those who seek to use wealth for good ends so often become not its master but its slave." Bernard of Clairvaux wrote of the Rich Young Ruler in Matthew 19 that he "did not own his possessions: they owned him; if he had owned them, he could have been free of them." Contemporary theologian Stanley Hauerwas writes that we should become dispossessed of our possessions. We do that by seeking first the kingdom of God. When we seek first then kingdom, then we discover – "that for which we seek is given, not achieved." Whatever we were seeking from possessions and wealth, is already offered to us freely in the grace of God – just like God has already provided for the birds.

This section of the Sermon on the Mount, then, is really about trusting God and one another. A community shaped by this Sermon is a community of trust, wherein we don't have to rely solely on what we can gather, earn, or hoard.

Now, this is where we get to our worries and anxieties. Consumption and accumulating arise from fear and anxiety. At its most basic we fear that we might not have something should a crisis arise, so we store up more than what we need "just to be safe." I'm reminded of my Grandma Jones, who lived most of her life on a small farm in Narcissa, Oklahoma. Grandma was never wealthy, by any means. But she had this fear that difficult times might come again, like they had in the Great Depression. So, she wanted to be careful and prepared. Because of this, she kept all sorts of things just in case she might need them at some point in the future.

Grandma's anxious preparations were relatively harmless, but our fears and anxieties can go beyond this point and turn into actual greed. Greed is our tendency to accumulate beyond security for some future necessity. Greed also keeps what we accumulate for ourselves, rather than sharing it generously with others. Greed also fails to recognize and give thanks to God as the true source of our material blessing. If we understood it better as God's gift, then we would be quicker to share it with others of God's children.

Jesus speaks often about wealth. We tend to get nervous when he does, or when the preacher chooses to preach about it, because there's a likelihood that something Jesus says will hit close to home. After all, he's talking about a normal human activity that all of us engage in. And it's one of those activities that we know is fraught with danger. There are lots of gray areas, and it's easy to slide from healthy economic behavior into that which is more damaging to our soul.

It is because possessions and wealth are so fraught with danger that some, like St. Francis, have renounced all possession. Unlike Francis, I don't believe that renouncing all possessions is necessary for living the Sermon on the Mount faithfully. But I do understand how it could be easier to live the Sermon on the Mount if one didn't own anything. Because greed and consumption and accumulation, a lack of generosity and gratitude, or being

overcome with financial worries and anxieties are genuine, serious dangers.

Jesus is not condemning our need or desire to be rewarded for our labor or to use that reward in purchasing goods and services. But he is warning about those genuine, serious dangers that lie as sand traps on the great golf course of life.

What Jesus is warning about is our motivation, our desire, our attitude, our ultimate concern. Basically, he's saying, remove fear, anxiety, and worry from your economic mindset. And that way you do that, is to replace them instead with trust and generosity and gratitude.

Brian McLaren is one of the leaders in the Emergent Church movement. He is a prolific author and highly regarded preacher and lecturer, even in mainline Protestant circles. His 2007 book *Everything Must Change* is helpful in applying this passage from the Sermon on the Mount to our contemporary global economic situation. The subtitle of the book is "When the world's biggest problems and Jesus' good news collide." It is McLaren's firm belief that the message of Jesus means something in our contemporary context and that if we take Jesus seriously, then much about our contemporary way of life needs to change. And one area that needs change he calls "The Prosperity System."

The Prosperity System is basically our current economic status quo, which is constructed upon so many of those genuine, potential dangers – greed, worry, ingratitude, etc. McLaren proclaims that our economic system has become perverted into its own quasi-religion wherein accumulating more has become our ultimate concern. Here are some principles of our current economic religion. "Progress" has been made into a god. Owning and consuming more become something like a quasi-spiritual discipline and are proclaimed as the path to happiness. Freedom has become unaccountable corporate activity. And salvation results from competition, wherein some are exploited for the enriching of others. This instead of a system bound together by justice and the common good.

Jesus, McLaren writes, is not against the exchange of money. Instead, Jesus reminds us that in every exchange of money we are also expressing "trust, service, love, and [even at times] worship" in something. Every economic act already has some spiritual and theological component, because every economic act raises the question of what we value. What is our ultimate concern? Jesus proclaims that we cannot simultaneously serve two masters, God and Mammon. So what do we value most? God or Mammon?

But lest you think this sermon is about to turn into some rant against capitalism, McLaren's view is more nuanced than that. He writes,

Happiness is indeed to be had from things, but only things that are contemplated, or appreciated.

Now this is different than what we might expect to hear. What could he possibly mean?

McLaren goes on to say that we are to live with gratitude for the things that we do own. Owning something is not inherently wrong. Owning something and expressing gratitude for it is, in fact, a spiritual discipline. He writes,

[Gratitude] bonds the heart to the ultimate source of the gifts – God – instead of bonding the heart to the purveyor of the unfulfillable desire for [more].

True gratitude, then, connects us to God and to other people. This is something of what I felt after our recent car accident. We were protected when our car rolled on the icy roads because the car had been engineered, designed, and constructed well. I have never felt such gratitude toward an immaterial object, as I was grateful to that car. But truthfully, I understood that I was thankful to the engineers, designers, and factory line workers who had done their jobs well.

And it might be that way with everything we own. When we go to lunch, we can be thankful to the farmers who cultivated the crops and raised the livestock. When we sleep warmly in our beds at night we can be thankful to the contractor who built the house, the guy who services your furnace and keeps it running well, and the woman who works in the textile factory in Taiwan who made your sheets.

Gratitude arises from truly contemplating what we own, and it pulls us out of our self-involvement to understand how we participate in a great web of mutually supportive economic relationships.

I want to develop one final point that Brian McLaren make. According to him, the most radical thing we can do to end the dominance of the current abusive and unjust economic system is . . . to believe. To believe the good news proclaimed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. To believe that this type of world is actually possible. And, once believing, to begin to live it. The only thing that keeps our current unjust Prosperity System in place is because we believe it. Jesus calls us to believe that a better world is possible.

And that, once again, returns us to the question, what is our ultimate concern? Or what do we trust? Our fears and anxieties and worries have conditioned us to trust in Mammon. The Prosperity System would have us to believe that it is the only way to do things or the best way to do things.

But Jesus, Francis of Assisi, and Brian McLaren are telling us to trust in God.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life . . . look at the birds of the air . . . but strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you.