

“Wholehearted Devotion”
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Matthew 6:24-34

We have become so familiar with Jesus' prescription for worry that it may just go in one ear and out the other. But his words to “consider the birds of the air” took on new meaning for me recently when I read one of the cover articles of this month's *National Geographic*, entitled: “The Curious History of Feathers.” The history begins with a fossil found in Germany that is 150 million years old, and notes that birds are so commonplace, that it's easy to take for granted that a bird's wing is vastly more sophisticated than just about anything we see. Various birds use feathers – to keep cool or warm, to make or muffle noise, float or snowshoe, concentrate sound to improve hearing, build nests, assist digestion, carry water and escape predators by shedding feathers the way a lizard sheds its tail. “Feathers are the most complex thing that grows out of the skin of any organism,” says Richard Prum the expert on the evolution of birds. “It is astounding how thousands of diverse structures work together to create plumage.” Now that is just the feathers of the birds for which God provides providential care. Jesus says God cares more about us than that.

Among the many wild flowers through which Jesus walked, we are not sure what flowers he means when he says, “Consider the lilies of the field,” Did he point to the delicate white one that grows in sandy soil and looks very much like our Easter lily, or a to crimson gladiolus, or the red anemone abundant in Palestine in the spring? We're not sure, but what we do know is that there are one hundred and ten species of lilies alone, all intricate and unique. If God so clothes them, how much more is the work of God's care wrapped around us? The point Jesus is making is that the whole of creation, from wing to petal, is continually under God's delicate and loving care.

Jesus' lesson from nature is given as an example in a larger lesson about life. Our worry about food, clothing and material things can get in the way of our trust and devotion to God. When it comes to our well-being, there is an apparent competitor for our trust in this regard, another means of material provision which Jesus sums up under the Greek term, *mammon*. Many of you remember when the Greek was left untranslated in earlier versions of the Bible and the saying read, “You cannot serve God and mammon.” *Mammon* has two meanings, actually; our New Revised Standard Version of the bible in the pews reads simply, “You cannot serve God and wealth.” Another translation of *mammon* is actually, “the god of wealth.” (2)

You cannot serve God, the Creator of all that is, including the birds, the lilies and the human family, *and* serve the god of wealth. God expects our wholehearted devotion. And what Jesus means is – you cannot trust material wealth to take your worry away; indeed, I think it's fair to say that the people who have the most money are also the people most worried about money. He does not condemn money as evil in

and of itself; he doesn't say we shouldn't have what it takes to live. It's devoting one's whole self to material gain, that's the problem, and it is indeed a very human problem. You cannot have it both ways, Jesus says. If you place your ultimate security in your economic wellbeing, then you are not fully trusting in God. Money, worry about money, love of money, the belief that money buys happiness, the rat race money fuels and the illusory pleasures it buys pull in the opposite direction from the kingdom Jesus proclaims.

If you want to be anxious about something, Jesus says – then worry about the demands of the kingdom of God – loving one another, forgiving one another, caring for the poor, joining Jesus himself in his healing ministry, and inviting others to know and love God through him. How do we find the resources for that kingdom kind of life? Staying connected to the natural world better enables us to stay connected to God, and to understand our place in the creation.

A friend of mine, a much younger preacher who lives on a small farm and serves a small church in rural Alabama, tells about a conversation she had with her five year old recently. They were driving along in the car, and young Thomas was buckled in the back seat, when he said to his mother Leanne, “You know, money is really valuable.” “Yes,” Leanne agreed, “it is.” A few moments later, he added, “You know what else is really valuable? Jewels.” “Yes,” Mom responded, figuring that he was thinking of pirate treasure, “they are valuable.” After another long pause, he said, “And you know what else is *really* valuable?” “What?” his mother asked, to which Thomas responded... “Air.” “Yep, it sure is,” she said.

And later, Leanne wondered, “How could I ever explain human economy? The most valuable of the three – of money, jewels and air – the one we can live mere minutes without, is the only one that is free.” (3)

Jesus wants for each of us – abundant life, and that means having adequate food and clothing and shelter. But he also wants us to understand, as Leanne pondered how to help her five-year-old understand the value of things, that the essence of a truly abundant life is free. And if in our freedom, we share the gifts of Christ himself: love, forgiveness, healing, justice and fairness for righteousness sake – the richer our lives will truly be.

As one biblical commentary says, “What our hearts really desire, of course, is to count – to count *for something* and to count to someone. To come to the end of a day – or to the end of a life – with the satisfaction of having stood for what is good, with the joy of having been loved and having loved well in return, with the memory of having shown mercy, and with the peace of having walked with God – these are the true treasures, the treasures of the kingdom, a fortune no thief can plunder.”

The interesting thing about Jesus' lesson on wholehearted devotion to God is that he does not deny that we have material, physical needs. Christian spirituality is never separated from the created world and the life it offers. As a matter of fact, if you abandon altogether the provisions of this world for a wholly spiritual existence, you still may not find what you're after.

History is full of people who have been wholehearted about trying to be devoted to God, but it does not always work out the way you might think. Tim, a promising young instructor at Yale University, was the product of a long line of Calvinists, and he inherited a sort of zealous perfectionist tendency to live and work to the glory of God. His determination to give himself to God wholeheartedly amid the academic pressures of a place like Yale took their toll on his health. He allowed himself no more than four hours of sleep a day and a simple diet – in order to devote close to twenty hours a day of work and study. Before long he suffered a total collapse. In a touching moment of his story, his biographer tells of Tim’s oh-so-proper Puritan father who came to Yale and carried him home.

After months of his father’s loving care, months of complete rest, good food, wine, and a particular tea brewed from the bark of a particular tree, Timothy Dwight was restored. He returned to Yale and became a preacher, a hymn writer, and from 1795 to 1817 was the President of Yale University. Two hundred years later he is remembered mostly for his hymn, “I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord.” *I love Thy Kingdom Lord, the house of Thine Abode, the church our blest Redeemer saved with his own precious blood. For her my tears shall fall, for her my prayers ascend; to her my cares and toils be given, till toils and cares shall end.* In the end, Timothy Dwight learned that you cannot give yourself wholly over in devotion to God without a community. (4)

Maybe that sense of community came first by his father’s rescue and healing care, but it became manifested ultimately by his faith in the mission of the church, the house of God’s abiding presence, a sign of the kingdom of God. Whole hearted devotion to seeking God’s kingdom, is ever a community endeavor, a corporate trust. What you cannot do fully is picked up by your neighbor in the pew. Like a flock of birds, like a field of flowers, together we trust that God cares for us, and provides for us what we need to do the work of Jesus Christ.

AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) National Geographic, February, 2011.
- 2) Feasting on the Word, p. 405.
- 3) Leanne Pierce Reed, Moveable Feast unpublished paper on this text, 2011.
- 4) Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Feb. 2011. p. 38 Tom Long,