

19 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, 20 but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

22 “The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, 23 but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If, then, the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

24 “No one can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

25 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life? 28 And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31 Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ 32 For it is the gentiles who seek all these things, and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

34 “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today. **-New Revised Standard Version**

I can't read this passage in Matthew without thinking of Bill Thomas, a saint of First Presbyterian Church of Lowville, New York, the first church that welcomed my service as a pastor. I first met Bill on Memorial Day Weekend 2002, the day before I candidated for the congregation. The search committee hosted a reception with the elders of the church so that we could become acquainted. Bill was a diminutive older gentleman who plopped down next to me and engaged in conversation with me for awhile until a fateful moment. He asked, “Are you into birds?” To which I responded, “No, not particularly.” At which point he promptly stood up and with a wave of his hand dismissed me.

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This is not my only memory of Bill. Bill was also the stewardship chair at the church for the first several years of my ministry. As our Gospel reading today suggests money and material goods and anxiety or worry often go hand in hand. When a group of church members sit down to talk money, it is not unusual for anxiety to run high. Somebody is usually convinced we'll run out of money any day now and others are concerned we're throwing money away, spending it on ourselves and not on meaningful ministry. When it comes time to set a budget for the new year and to invite commitments for that year, it is not surprising for there to be much sighing and hand wringing. This happens in all churches. It is normal human behavior. But... this is what made Bill's presence on the stewardship and finance committee so memorable and so valuable. Bill was always calm and cool as a cucumber. He often had a smile on his face. When he chaired the committee he'd come to meetings with a lovely prayer prepared to offer. And when others would start to voice their worries or concerns he'd say, "We'll be fine. God will provide. God always does." Even when giving was down and expenses were up, he'd maintain this perspective. And he'd always reduce the anxiety in the room.

And when I read our passage for this week these two memories of Bill are drawn together— Bill's special relationship with birds and unusual relationship to money and material goods. Jesus advised his disciples that when worry creeps in about how daily needs might be met, they should consider what? Well, first he suggests that they consider the birds of the air. Birds who neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet are fed by God. I imagine that we have a lot of bird lovers in this congregation, but I'm not sure that any have spent as much time considering birds as dear saint of the church Bill Thomas did. For goodness sake, over the age of 80 he and his beloved Jane traveled all the way to South Africa solely for the purpose of considering birds. Could it be that his deep and abiding trust in the provision of God which made such an impression on the stewardship and finance committee and me was directly correlated to the attention he pays to the birds of the air?

I wonder. In any case, I believe our Gospel reading, and the life and witness of Bill Thomas, suggests that where we set our sights has everything to do with the quality of life we lead. The truth is that an obsessive focus on the stuff of this world has a tendency to increase anxiety, and increased anxiety has a tendency to decrease life satisfaction. Jesus asks, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" What an excellent question. In fact, don't we know that worrying eats up hours and hours of our lives? Can I get a witness from any worriers in the room? I know that I can testify. And hasn't modern science revealed that stress, often fueled by anxiety, can actually shorten lives?

And have you noticed that in your own personal lives, just as in the life of the church, material goods and worry go hand in hand? When we focus on the stuff of our lives, the stuff in our bank accounts or investments, the stuff in our houses or garages, the stuff in our refrigerators, the stuff in our storage units... the stuff... when we focus on the stuff, the stuff we have that we have to take care of or find a place for, the stuff we don't have that we want, the stuff of our lives, our worry tends to go up. When our sights are set on treasures on earth, there are always more treasures that we could have, and there are always threats to the treasures we do have, and we quickly get the perception that we do not have now and never will have enough. This is true for people on all rungs of the social ladder; when our eyes are set only on the material treasures of this world, money or possessions, no matter how much we have, we can easily believe we do not have enough or that what we have will someday go away.

This is particularly true in economic times like those in which we now find ourselves, with the cost of gas, and groceries, and housing through the roof, and the value of investments down... at times like these there are many worrying and wondering about their futures and the future of their children. Many on all rungs of the social ladder, when focusing on material things here and now, feel their blood pressure rising.

The pithy observation that Jesus makes in this passage that one cannot serve God and wealth, that one ends up inevitably loving one and hating the other, a slave to one

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and an opponent to the other, seems proven true by many of our personal stories and indeed even of our national story. When we set our sights on the service of our own wealth, what happens to us? Do we not find ourselves then in a position where it is harder and harder to live as the generous and gentle people God has called us to be? How can we live lives of love, obedient to Christ's greatest commandment, loving God with all that we are and loving our neighbors as ourselves, when we are sucked into anxious cycles of accumulation and loss?

So how shall we live instead? Jesus suggests that rather than working to store treasures on earth that instead our energies ought to be invested in storing treasures in heaven. He suggests that we consider birds and flowers, that we look to the beautiful creation to see how well God provides. He suggests that we strive for God's kingdom and God's righteousness above all else. And finally he suggests that each day be lived for itself, that each be taken in turn, that we live fully in the present moment.

Jesus' first suggestion to store up treasures in heaven might leave you scratching your head. "How am I supposed to do that?" you might wonder. I suspect that the rest of Jesus' advice in this passage gives us some idea, but I heard a story several years ago that sounded to me like one way of storing treasure in heaven. A young mom of twin daughters, Brianna, shared that she and a friend are always calling one another to swap stories about their kids. Someone admonished her to write everything down because it will all be forgotten, but Brianna responded by saying something like this, "Rather than worrying about writing everything down, I just try to truly soak in and appreciate what is happening when it is happening. I give thanks to God in the moment and try to live that moment fully. Like just recently it was a beautiful day and our yard was full of dandelions. My girls were both wearing jeans and they went outside to play. I came out to check on them only to find one of them had her jeans on backwards and she was bent over with her little hiney sticking up in the air while her sister was shoving dandelions every which way into her two pockets. It was so precious. I didn't run inside to write it down. I just watched it unfold. I soaked it up. And I gave thanks to

God right then and there." Brianna surely stored treasure in heaven when she stayed present to moments like this, when she delighted in the two precious gifts that God gave her, and when she took these moments as opportunities to return thanks to God. And I imagine that if she continued to live life like this, even if she couldn't remember these unspeakably precious moments when the girls were screaming at each other at the age of 16, or living far from home in adulthood, she will yet be accustomed to setting her sights on God and God's provision; she will be practiced in trusting God; she may be free from the worry that plagues so many of us.

Will you, like Bill, look to the birds? Or like Brianna to the dandelions in backwards pockets? On what will you set your sights that you might increasingly find yourself growing in love and service of God, and in joyful trust in God's provision? These are good things to think about on this semi-annual meeting day.