



Sermon on the Mount: Seeking in the Kingdom of Anxiety – Matthew 6:24-34
The Rev. Geoff Parker to First Parish Church, Brunswick – Jan. 30, 2011

Now, at several points in the sermon that's about to follow it may seem as if I'm getting down on us all as a culture for experiencing the normal worries of our lives. I want to assure you that just as I was beginning to reflect and write this week, my email pinged (ah, email, that ubiquitous all-powerful, never-ceasing anxiety machine!) and politely informed me that I had a new electric bill that would kindly like my attention! So, I will clearly have no cure-alls for the problems of the day.

So, now that I've established my bona fides as an official citizen of the world of anxiety, and worries of all days, not just tomorrow... At face value, it's easy to read Jesus's exhortation to trust in God's care as the sparrows do as a call to abandon the normal pattern of work that, well, makes us good thrifty protestants to begin with! "Don't worry about where your food will come from. Don't worry about that next paycheck," it seems to say. The morals of our fables, thousands of our old-saw pieces of advice about being thrifty and foresighted, and surely, the entire financial planning industry stand in stark relief next to Jesus's teaching. Well, and then there's just the news: financial turmoil, revolution and political oppression, lots to worry about.

We cannot dismiss the extreme side of this text. Throughout the history of all of the world's religions, *asceticism*, a spiritual practice of pulling back from the financial and work patterns of life in order to focus on the holy, has been a consistent trend. It is still a regular part of religious life for monastic communities of Christians, Buddhists, and others. Jesus clearly lived a life that was primarily supported by the kindness of others as he moved about preaching and teaching. He sends his first disciples out to spread the gospels, telling them to bring only the clothes on their backs and the sandals on their feet. He tells a rich but sincere follower that the final thing he must do is sell all of his belongings and give the money to the poor. It could not have escaped his thought that any time someone participated in the existing economy of Judea, they helped solidify the imperial power

of Rome and the oppression of the people of Israel entailed by that. Removing oneself from that system would doubtless have been an ideal that Jesus would have supported.

Nonetheless, we are not in an ideal world, and we are not ideal people, surely, and the Jesus who sat and ate with tax-collectors knew that the people who were learning from him would often have to engage the market of the world, i.e. Rome. So maybe we are not—you know, entirely—on the hook for owning our cars, or houses, or this sanctuary... and perhaps entertaining the occasional thought as to how we might possibly pay for them in the next day, or month, or even year. So how are we to read this text?

I think back to my days community organizing with a group of churches, synagogues, and mosques around the New Haven area. The group has as its lead organizer a fireplug of a man named Pat, who studied to be a priest, and then found love and work in the life outside the priesthood, bringing the teachings of Saul Alinsky and the Industrial Area Foundation to bear on his work with unions and churches. Pat loves nothing more than this work, except for maybe singing in Irish pubs with his band, which he does often. He was the first person that taught me that the bible was meant to be read with passion, and as a call to our lives. He reads the bible as a story of God's people prevailing over oppression.

Pat spent a lot of time teaching church communities that were for all intents and purposes powerless that power wasn't a bad thing. At its worst, power is neutral, but overwhelmingly, power is really good. Power is, at its core, simply the ability to act. In this, it is like love, it is a gift from God, and it is a renewable resource. The problem, Pat would insist as he jabbed his thumb into the cover of his bible, was that pharaohs, and kings, and priests, and emperors thought in sharp opposition to this fact. To them, power was a non-renewable resource, a scarcity: there was only so much to go around, and so if you wanted more, they thought, you had to go and take it from someone else. We

need not look much farther than the news from Northern Africa in the last week to realize that power has a way of getting around these sorts of folks after a while.

What I hear in Jesus's words today is that if you spend your life in anxiety, and particularly what I would call *anxiety of scarcity*, your life begins to change, and not for the better. Anxiety of scarcity is a phenomenon we are seeing lots of these days. There are fewer jobs, less money in the hands of fewer people, bigger debts. There are real people who are really hurting, and I don't think Jesus had his eye on them when he spoke about worry. The anxiety that this scarcity has produced amongst those who are not greatly experiencing it in our culture is palpable. It's the lead in every news story, it's the go-to issue in political debate on taxes, the role of government, and more.

I would say this anxiety joins all the others in our pantheon of human concern in its twisting of our relationships. Guiding one's life by the fear of losing power almost always leads to tyranny, fear of losing love almost always leads to obsession and possessiveness, and fear of losing our wealth almost always corrupts our sense of value and worth. To build our lives around the anxiety, the fear of scarcity of wealth is to make wealth into our own little god. The simplicity of sparrows... of lilies, in Jesus's poem against worry, is in how he depicts them wordlessly depending on God as the source of all life, not a god solely of grain, or of sun, or of rain.

So how do we move forward; how do we live into this meeting that we'll have today, this budget? I think we're called to pay close attention to our finances as a community. We're meant to be intentional about where we spend our time and treasure. We're meant to be thankful for the gifts of God, and the sharing of those gifts by our members which make this church possible. As such, planning and providing faithful stewardship of those gifts should be an essential part of our life together. However, I think we need to be intentional about resisting our anxieties about these resources so that they never compromise our essential identity as a community. We are a community which is concerned with our relationship with God above all else—not our power, our finances, and

not our comfort. It's a delicate balancing act. Yet I think we can accomplish it. Why? Because through the years and through the scriptures our ancestors have passed down *dozens* of stories of how—when finally shaken out of their fear of scarcity—thousands of people were fed when there was not enough food, or no food at all. Because they instituted a practice that we continue today at our communion table, which seeks to remind people that God has set a table for all, and all should rightly be invited to that table, and all should be fed. And, ultimately, because through all the thousands of years and countless iterations of church communities, we still gather together to discuss our future walk together, sharing and rejoicing in the gifts we are given, making important decisions—not from scarcity, but from hope. May we always meet so.