

May 17, 2020

The Rev. Dr. Morar Murray-Hayes



Reading: Matthew 6:25-34

The Message: Consider the Lilies

[Video](#)

“Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat ... or about your body what you will wear.”

This is my favourite passage.

Not, oddly, for its calming influence on me -- even in normal times.

It's my favourite passage because no matter how often I come back to it, it still speaks prophetically to me because I never live up to it.

So “Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat” Really?

There are three people in our house right now and when it became clear that our daughter may move into her own condo at the end of the month, my spouse didn't respond with, “Oh, I'll miss her!” (which he will -- miss her like crazy -- enough that I've told her and her partner to expect a nightly visit.) No, Alan's first comment to me was, “I hope she will keep ordering our food for us!”

“Or about your body, what you will wear.”

Well, that some of you have down pat, I'm sure. Day PJs and Night PJs.

I wonder, if I film segments separately, am I wearing the same thing? I'm traumatized by the memory of a coffee cup that appeared in *The Game of Thrones* -- and I didn't even watch *The Game of Thrones*!

So, wanting to face our pandemic anxiety head on, I thought, ‘who better to turn to than Ted Lutz, who was in the midst of teaching a course on the Gospel of Matthew when all this struck.

He spent a day preparing material for me. I include it with the print version of today's worship so you can go back to the email and scroll down till you see it. For those who have taken his courses, his style will be familiar. He will illuminate what parts of the text are most authoritatively the words of Jesus and what parts reflect the concerns of Matthew, a first century Jew who was reconciling his excommunication from the Jewish faith.

Some form of “Do not be afraid” appears in the Bible 365 times -- there is even an online calendar for each day -- I guess you get to be afraid one day in Leap Year.

What this passage reflects is the consistency of anxiety in the people of the bible -- and that reflects just how difficult life was in Jesus' life, in the lives of the disciples, in the lives of the women.

Ted writes,

“Matthew has composed this speech, made up of different sayings of Jesus that he could well have delivered, but on different occasions. Consequently, we have here a complex collection of similar sayings that partially contradict, or don't perfectly relate.”

Jesus doesn't stand off in a corner, watching the difficulties of life. In those circumstances, he could have occasionally given a few teachings -- or maybe even just one. But as Ted reminds me, these 'Don't worry!' phrases were gathered by Matthew perhaps from many different times that Jesus used them.

Things are not that different today. We have things to worry about. It's normal for humans to have worrisome challenges. Jesus knows. Jesus is the kind of person who seeks to reassure people in situations of loss, illness, injury, persecution, death.

Coming to that conclusion, I thought about folk who give me a sense of calm, who I would believe, when they said, "Do not be afraid."

And a parishioner came to mind. A daughter of the manse, a woman of great faith, whose presence has always been a calming influence in whatever situation in which I have encountered her.

She is a psychiatric social worker in a residential psychiatric unit and this week I asked her what strategies she was using in her work to help her patients deal with this extra layer of anxiety.

She spoke of facing reality, reframing negative thoughts and seeking joy:

Facing the reality that someone you love or you may die.

We are all in that space. It has happened to us in so many personal and tragic ways through our lives. For some of us at Christ First, death has been a reality during this time. It seems so much more tragic with this layer of pandemic. At the same time, the whole world is facing this as a more likely possibility than in other times. We are challenged by Matthew to trust, have confidence in Jesus's assurances God will provide what we need.

Reframing negative thoughts

From, 'we will all die' to 'some will become ill and some will die.'

From, 'things will never be normal again' to 'normal changes everyday whether we see it or not; we will adapt.'

Seeking Joy

giving thanks and taking time to share with others.

She writes, "I ask folks all the time, do you really walk mindfully, do you stop to really give thanks for food on the table, do you really listen to others? Negative thoughts are like clouds; they come in different shapes and colours but eventually, they move away and are a thing of the past."

Ted writes in part,

Scholars have concluded that today's passage belongs with Jesus' sending of his disciples on their preaching mission [Matt 10:9-10]. They were to exhibit their faith by trusting that God would provide. Jesus knew their confidence level at this stage was not fully up to what it should be, so when they protested, he gave them this speech.

A wise Scottish preacher once made a helpful distinction between the foreground and the background of life. He used the metaphor of a painting and said that life has both a foreground and a background. The foreground are the things that are right in front of us. The things that we easily focus on and can feel like are right on top of us. It's the things that are seen.

And the background of life is the invisible unseen spiritual realities that are behind us and beyond us.

We need to look at both the foreground and the background. For the foreground, Jesus reminds us that we have eaten, dressed, grown up with God's love, God's providence. Then he tells us, Notice the background! Look at the lilies of the field -- I even have lilies in my background today. Look to the unseen, divine, eternal background that's meant to put everything into proper perspective.

Jesus recognizes both the foreground and the background of life. He's not dismissing the foreground of our immediate cares, worries and needs, but he's wanting us to see that that's not the whole picture. He wants us to see our needs in light of the dynamic background of God's loving character and kingdom. And it's in the light of that background, that Jesus teaches us to do two things: Don't worry; and Seek the Kingdom.

We seek the kingdom when we care for others. Mike, the new chair of The Compass Board, told us that the volunteers are most upset that they cannot serve their clients. Seeking the kingdom. Dana is helping clients with their taxes. Seeking the kingdom. Sue tells me her IODE volunteers are anxious to get back into the shop to raise money for their charities. Seeking the kingdom. The Vandermale's sustain us with poetry and prayer. Seeking the kingdom. You pray for the world, and for those you love. Seeking the kingdom.

The spread of Christianity in the early centuries was largely due to the care and compassion that Christians showed for the poor and the sick during different plagues and epidemics. Eusebius, the early church historian, wrote that because of the church's compassion for those in need during times of crisis, "the deeds of Christians were on everyone's lips."

Find ways, through prayers and actions to seek the realm of God.
And may the words of Jesus and the stories of his life give you what you need to face your reality.
May God's faithful character and a vision of the eternal be the background that transforms the way you see everything else. And may you know joy this week. Let it be so .. for you.