

Reconnecting the Grace-full Body: Treasures in Heaven and T-Shirts on Earth

Matthew 6:21-34

Rev. Jenaba Waggy

October 29, 2023

I graduated college right after the 2008 financial crash, straight into the Great Recession. Zero out of ten, do not recommend attempting to begin adulthood in the “worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.”¹ Through a completely ridiculous series of relaxed oversight laws, lucrative but wildly disproportionate lending like subprime mortgages, and sheer overconfidence, the global economy toppled. Banks in the U.S., the E.U., Australia, Canada, and Japan began to run out of liquid assets and manufacture ways to prop each other up until they couldn’t and had to declare bankruptcy; homeowners defaulted on mortgage loans at startling rates, leading to the U.S. Treasury Department having to bail out Freddie Mac and Fannie May to the tune of \$1.6 trillion. By the time bailout programs for Wall Street banks had ended in 2014, the U.S. Fed had dumped more than \$4 trillion into the U.S. economy.²

The thing is, a much smaller scale catastrophe with similar causes had happened in Southeast Asia a decade prior.³ And trends are showing that now, not quite twenty years later, we’re maneuvering ourselves to have yet another variation on a theme.⁴

Welcome to church, where we absolutely talk about politics, religion, and money, and we even do so at the dinner table.

We finish our series today on the grace-full Body of Christ, a series in which we’ve been using staff positions to consider where our gifts and passions might be in our calling to make disciples of Jesus Christ to transform the world. I hope you’ve found, if not a specific place for yourself, at least permission that not all of you have to have, say, my job in order for your gifts to “count” in some way. The Body of Christ is vast, and there are so many needs and hopes and dreams within it that mesh with exactly what you can bring, which is pretty cool. With today’s excerpt from Matthew’s version of the Sermon on the Mount, we come to the part of the conversation almost no one wants to have: money.

“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be, also” is a phrase that has become a well-known platitude in conversation, although not nearly as well-known as “money is the root of all evil.” Funny enough, that’s a *misquote*: 1 Timothy 6:10 says that *the love of* money is the root of all evil, not money itself. Even here, Jesus doesn’t say, “Have no treasures at all.” This section of the extended sermon that is sometimes called the summary of all His teachings is about intention: what are we doing with our treasures? Where do they live in our hearts, and where do our hearts live? Where are our minds when it comes to considering what we have and what we need?

¹ [Financial crisis of 2007–08 | Definition, Causes, Effects, & Facts | Britannica Money](#)

² Ibid.

³ [The Korean Financial Crisis of 1997—A Strategy of Financial Sector Reform \(imf.org\)](#)

⁴ [A recession is still likely. Here are 6 reasons why | Fortune](#)

At first glance, the long part of this passage that deals with flowers and birds seems almost insultingly flippant. Of course, we're worried about having enough to eat or clothes to wear, especially those of us who live in Michigan as the winter awakens. We need only look on our own doorstep to see those who don't have enough and are caught in the wheels of homelessness and poverty. I am not going to tell the people in Palestine and Israel not to worry about food, nor am I going to say to the people of Acapulco, Mexico that the flowers are fine after Hurricane Otis.

And of course, we're worried about tomorrow, especially when there seem to have been no lessons learned from the 2008 debacle and those of us not in charge of economic decisions are absolutely going to be hit hardest when things fall apart.

And we're certainly not the first to know that kind of worry. Jesus' original audience was more likely poor than not. Jesus didn't tend to attract many economic high rollers, not least because He had the habit of telling folks outrageous things like "sell all your possessions and give to the poor before following Me." Professor Emerson Powery notes that, "the reality of life in the first century for many people was a challenge to acquire the necessities of life—like food and clothing—through laborious living." For those seeking refuge and hope under the financial and social hardship of the Roman Empire, being told not to worry might have been laughably naïve.

Except, as is usually the case with Jesus, the surface cannot be where we stop when we're looking for meaning. John Wesley has a sermon on the beginning of this passage and writes that this is entirely about intention: "What the eye is to the body, the intention is to the soul...if we seek or desire anything else than God, how soon is our foolish heart darkened!...as long as [we are] steadily fixed thereon, on God in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, we are more and more filled with the love of God".⁵

Jesus is never callous—often direct and sometimes snappish, but never cruel. He is not saying that need isn't real; He *is* saying that we are going to warp ourselves if the need becomes our entire heart. What god are we serving if our whole being is anxiety? What god is our master if everything we do is about shoring up our position here? What god drives us if all of our interactions are about having more, or even about having enough, and none of them are about seeking to love God, ourselves, and our neighbors?

Part of how we know that Jesus isn't being flippant is when we read beyond these verses, yet another moment when it matters so much for, we people of faith to put Scripture back into its context rather than scooping out verses like fish from a stream. Just before this piece on what gods we serve and how we are not to be worried, Jesus discussed prayer and how prayer, just like our money and our treasures, is a thing to be given to God and not to be performed or lauded. And as part of the teaching on prayer, we get Matthew's version of what we've come to call the Lord's Prayer.

We say this every Sunday, and for many of us—me included—it's become so familiar that we stumble if we actually have to consider the words while saying it. But it matters that we do, because the concept that we could ever stop worrying about food and clothing is buried right in the middle: "Bring in your kingdom / so that your will is done on earth as it's done in heaven. /

⁵ "Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, VIII," in *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, eds. Outler and Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 241–242.

Give us the bread we need for today.”⁶ Or, for those of us who memorized it in the King James, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread.”

Professor Emerson Powery puts it like this: “Do not worry about what you will eat in 6:25 does not mean that food is unimportant; followers of Jesus should pray for ‘daily bread’ (6:11), but then trust God to provide it.”⁷ It’s absolutely true that we are more complicated than sparrows or lilies; for one thing, neither of them has to do taxes. But it’s also absolutely true that we cannot anticipate all the ways things will go wrong. The average person didn’t see the 2008 crash coming; the people listening to Jesus’ sermon could not truly envision that Rome would fall, or that the Man talking to them would change the world. If we borrow tomorrow’s worries, if we allow ourselves to get so caught up in the maintenance of our treasures or the ways in which we can shore up what we feel we need, we stop paying attention to God—we cannot serve two masters. Either we bind ourselves to anxiety and ignore God, or we trust that God is with us even when bread is scarce, and our clothes are ragged. Or, as Bob Deffinbaugh puts it, “Every one of us is actively pursuing some goal in life. We are all devoted to one thing or another. If we have made our goal the quest for material prosperity, then we must redirect our efforts. The Christian life is not a matter of passivity—not at all. We are to be active in the carrying out of God’s will. So, when it comes to the matter of worry, we must deliberately and purposefully determine that we shall not waste our energies on worry, but that we shall lay our hands on the task immediately before us. It is not wrong to be ambitious and aggressive. It is only wrong to pursue the wrong goals.”⁸

“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be, also...therefore, stop worrying about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself.” Here at First United Methodist Church, we have folks who help us do both the planning so that we are good stewards of our treasures and the reorientation to our mission so that we are good followers of the Christ Who gave us everything, anyway. Marty and Jenn guide our bookkeeping and accounts, and the finance committee helps keep an eye on how we’re doing so that we can care for the treasures we have. You may have noticed some communication from them lately, and we’ll be talking more about how we are trusting God with our daily bread while also working to bring the kingdom here, to do God’s will on earth as it is in heaven as we move into our stewardship campaign over the next few weeks. Maybe chatting through faithful finances is your deep desire; if so, let us know and we will gladly help you find your place.

Maybe you have enough of talking about treasures in your beyond-church life, and that’s fine. In church or outside of it, we are still called to recognize that all of what we have and all of who we are cannot become the focus of our hearts, our minds, our souls. That’s God’s spot; that’s Christ’s hope, that we will give our very real worries and uncertainties to the One Who can carry them for us, with us, so that we are freed to appreciate that there are beautiful birds chirping away at us even while the lilies rest for the winter. “Desire first and foremost God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness,” and *then* work on the desire of the rest of it. Let us serve first the God Who calls us by name and let all else flow from that. Amen.

⁶ Mt. 6:10–11, CEB.

⁷ [Commentary on Matthew 6:24-34 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2011

⁸ [23. The Fatal Failures of Religion: #4 Materialism \(Matthew 6:19-34\) | Bible.org](#)