

The Abundance of God's Kingdom

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Matthew 6: 24-34

The song says:

Saw a girl on the street from my home
Like a fire on the hillside she shown
And I knew right then that my best days were gone
And I'd been, been in the lowlands too long

Gillian Welch's song "Lowlands," sings of the longing of someone to get back to her home in the mountains. I hear it and I know that feeling. When I moved from Newport News to here, there was a palpable physical and spiritual feeling of being renewed by the land, by the mountains. But, even living here, with mountains all around me, I can still know that feeling and I need to be actually up there, in them. Because there's a correction of how I see my life that can take place for me there.

And I think that's something Jesus knew. In today's text, it would seem that he would free us for God. He would free us for the Kingdom, for a new, very different way of living with others, by grounding us in the abundant grace of God in creation. Says Jesus, we need to be freed from living life cut off from an awareness of and dependence on God's grace. What's really amazing about this text is that when Jesus was talking about not being able to serve two masters, and in this case particularly, not making "wealth" our master, he's talking to both rich and poor! Presumably, not only were there people in the crowd who were collaborators with the Roman Empire who were able to accumulate wealth, but there were also peasants who may not have known where their next meal was coming from. But, Jesus seems to sense that they are all in danger of serving a master other than God, of serving wealth as their true master. Jesus tells them all not to worry (or as an older translation has it, not to be anxious) about their lives... "what you will eat... or what you will wear."

We often read this in one of two ways; either we see it as a word to the poor about trusting in God in spite of the horrendous circumstances of their life, or, we see it as an admonition to the rich to stop being so materialistic. Either way, we're inclined to think that it hardly applies to us! But, it goes deeper than that doesn't it? He's addressing the whole spectrum, so there's something else here. And I think it's important to note that in telling folks not to be anxious about the circumstances of their life, never does Jesus imply that their lives will be trouble free. In fact, he says just the opposite, "tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." But, he says to rich and poor alike, to be anxious about those things is to serve a master other than God... it's to let wealth become your master.

Well, we might as well be honest. We haven't bought this. The fact is we think we can serve two (or more!) masters. A little of this, a little of that, because we think finally we're the captain of our fate. Now, we may read this and think that we *shouldn't* serve two masters. You know that we should really be more dedicated to God, or that there is always room for us to be better stewards of our wealth than we have been. And both of those things are true, of course, but in terms of what Jesus is saying here, they are beside the point! Jesus doesn't say that we shouldn't serve more than one master. Instead, he's making a simple observation. He's saying it's impossible. It goes right to what he'd said just a few verses before about wherever your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Stanley Hauerwas has tied all that together with what Jesus also says in the sermon about our desires to be recognized for our piety, our public prayers, our fasting or whatever. Says Hauerwas, those desires are "not unrelated to our wealth. We think we can be something other than what we do and own, but Jesus challenges that assumption." What Hauerwas has picked

up on is that we learn to see, we learn to understand our life, by what we do. So, if our life consists of accumulating and owning, then we will be tempted to think that we can secure our survival through possessions. Hauerwas also has tied together what Jesus says here about not being able to serve God and wealth with what Jesus says later in Matthew about not being able to serve both God and the emperor. Says Hauerwas, there is "a close connection between wealth and the emperor because we believe that our wealth depends on the security offered by the emperor." "After all, emperors always claim to be our benefactors."

So, it's all tied together, isn't it? We are tempted to think that our life, our survival, our security depends on what we can get for ourselves. That's true whether we're talking about it on the level of nations, or on the level of individuals. And so, for us in the church, the fact is we haven't really bought what Jesus is saying. We think we *can* serve more than one master, don't we? Maybe it's because we don't think it's really possible to stop *worrying* about what we have and don't have.

Listen closely to what Jesus says. He invites us to a different way of seeing life which consequently will lead to a different way of being in the world. And he does it by pointing us toward the abundant grace of God in creation. "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them." "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass...will he not much more clothe you...? Jesus understands all of life as existing in the superabundance of relationships which is the very providence and sustenance of God.

Abundance of interdependent relationships is the mark of God's care for creation. Birds get fed by bugs and seeds and worms, and lilies turn their blossoms toward the sun and draw water in up through their roots. And it's all a part of this interdependent web of life. And says Jesus, we are a part of that, too. So, if you strive for the Kingdom of God, if you strive for this new way of being interdependent in community, of living in a community of trust and respect and valuing of each one, all that you really need for life will be given to you. Your life may indeed have much trouble, but you don't need to fear that, you stay in community with life, you strive for today's needs, you keep in view the abundance of God, and you find that you are supported and sustained.

That's it, you see. Abundance not scarcity. Abundance *is* where we live. And Jesus would get us to that right reading of life by a right reading of creation. Now, certainly the human anxiety response is also a good gift of creation that helps us survive. But, what we need to see is how human economic systems and our consumer culture cause and indeed depend on making our natural anxiety response system fire off when in fact there is no threat around us. Right? Creating all kinds of "needs" that aren't needs at all?

How ironic that having been taught to see that way, that we can never have enough, that we call that "being realistic?" Says Jesus, it is in fact illusion, and completely out of touch with reality. Says Jesus if you think that way, wealth is the master you will be serving. Instead, "look at the birds of the air... consider the lilies of the field." Listen to Jesus. Go to the mountains to get some new glasses, so you can see clearly. So you can see the beauty in simplicity and in relationships. So you can see the beauty in what you have, not in what you don't have. So you can see the superabundance of God's grace in each person.

Tony Campolo tells the story of teaching a college class one day and was talking on social problems and said, "Can you imagine what Jesus would say to a prostitute?" One of his students said, "Jesus never met a prostitute!" Campolo flipped open the Bible and immediately showed him where Jesus did meet prostitutes and what he said to them. The student looked back with a smile and said, "Doctor, when Jesus met a prostitute, do you think he saw a

prostitute?" He didn't, of course, because he'd looked at the birds and he'd considered the lilies and so he understood the superabundance of God's grace in and for each one.

Sam Wells has suggested that perhaps "the problem is that the human imagination is simply not large enough to take in all that God is and has to give. We are overwhelmed. God's inexhaustible creation, limitless grace, relentless mercy, enduring purpose, fathomless love: it is just too much to contemplate, assimilate, understand. This is the language of abundance. And if humans turn away it is sometimes out of a misguided but understandable sense of self-protection, a preservation of "identity" in the face of a tidal wave of glory."

Friends, here's the good news. We can give up all those identities we cling to that are born out of a model of scarcity, born out of thinking there's not enough of creation, not enough grace, not enough mercy, not enough purpose, not enough love to go around. In spite of anything that's ever happened to us, in spite all the tragedy we may have experienced, the only identity we need, the only one truly based in reality is the one claimed and celebrated in our baptism, beloved child of God, sustained, delighted in, provided for. If we'll remember that's who we are, we will indeed have only one master and it will be the One Jesus called Father.