

## ***Consider the Lilies***

A Sermon Preached by the  
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October 19, 2008  
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
Bloomington, Minnesota

Psalm 24:1-6  
Matthew 6:24-34

“Don’t worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink or what you will wear. . . look at the birds of the air . . . consider the lilies of the field. . .” Hearing that today, some of us might agree with the person who observed that those words could only have been written by a single guy living a carefree life on the beach in sunny Galilee as he danced along to Bobby McFerrin singing, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.” Or sung by a meerkat named Timon and his companion Pumbaa, a warthog, as they warbled “hakuna matata” to the young lion Simba. As most of us know, that kind of carefree attitude doesn’t match what we know of life on this planet – especially not right now, given the instability of the global economy.

Perhaps like some of you, my husband and I have watched our retirement account dwindle and have already faced into the possibility of working a few more years than we had originally planned. Like some of you, we’re looking at ways to economize, which makes at least one of us happy since it means a trip to Sam’s Club to buy the gargantuan package of paper towels or the super-duper extra-large container of laundry detergent – never mind that the one who usually does the laundry can’t lift it! Like all of you, we’re trying to do our part and figure out ways to get through the latest economic freefall. But that doesn’t mean that we don’t worry. We all worry about something, don’t we?

But while we may worry about our retirement, we aren’t worrying about whether or not there will be food on the table next week. While we may buy in larger quantities to save a few dollars, we’re not skipping meals or trying to figure out how to keep the electricity on. I am acutely aware – and so are you - that there’s a huge difference between the kinds of things that keep me up at night, and the kinds of things that keep the single mother with three children up at night. I know that I will probably never have to worry about whether or not I have a place to live or be able to afford my prescriptions; I will probably never have to make the choice between putting gas in the car or food on the table. I will probably never have to work three jobs to make ends meet. I know how fortunate I am that I even have a retirement account to worry about!

Let’s open that up a little more. As one pastor noted, “We should all be worried about the widening gulf between the haves and the have nots – the deep disparity between those for whom the world is conveniently arranged and those for whom nothing seems to work at all.”

He goes on to write, “Surely Jesus isn’t being critical of those of us who worry about our world and its poor, its victims, its sick and uninsured, its homeless, its widows and orphans and outcasts. And surely there is enough in Jesus’ record to dispel any notion that in his sermon he was being in any way insensitive to those who were truly hungry.”<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the point that Jesus was trying to make to his disciples – and to us – is that much of what we worry about isn’t important, and it takes energy and time away from the things we should be worried about.

So what are we to make of this exhortation to watch the birds and consider the lilies? We may be tempted to dismiss it, thinking that if flowers and birds are carefree, it’s only because they’re oblivious to the chaos. As the old bumper sticker says, “If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs – you clearly don’t comprehend the situation.” Or the other one about the difficulty of remembering that your mission was to drain the swamp when you’re up to your neck in alligators!

Remember that this passage from Matthew is still part of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is talking to his disciples, reminding them that what they’ve signed on for is not going to be easy. They have left everything – their livelihoods, their families, what little security they might have had – to follow him, to lead a life dependent on God’s providence and the kindness of strangers. Jesus essentially says to them, “Hey, discipleship doesn’t come with the guarantee of a place to sleep at night and three square meals a day, much less new shoes or warm clothes. And, honestly, do you think that worrying about it is going to make any difference? There’s a job to be done here, so get on with it and stop fussing and fretting about what you may or may not have! You either trust that God will take care of you or you don’t. You can’t serve two masters. You cannot serve God AND wealth. It’s that simple.”

Well, easier said than done, of course. Especially today, living in a culture that prizes acquisition and glorifies the ability to make money. But the lesson is still the same: it’s either God or money. So maybe it’s time to sit back and consider the lilies, to think about where we are in all of this and whether or not we really do trust God to care for us.

The Greek form used by the writer of Matthew in this bit of wisdom is the emphatic one: “look” or “consider” shakes us by the shoulders and says: No, *really* look! There are hundred of millions of those little birds and an equal number of those little flowers. Do you not understand that if God cares for all of that, God surely cares for you! Do you not understand that this is God’s creation and God loves all of it? Oh, and by the way, it *all* belongs to God. None of it is really yours. It would be good to learn that lesson early on and remember it when you start to think otherwise.

“The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.”

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<sup>1</sup> David Van Dyke, “The Right Way to Worry,” House of Hope Presbyterian Church, May 25, 2008.

We're talking this month about stewardship, and as we do, I want us to begin to think about it as more than just balancing the budget or meeting the budget goals for this year, so that stewardship becomes an ongoing, year-round focus. The long-term goal should be for us to become sustaining stewards of all that has been entrusted to us, to relocate ourselves along that covenantal journey and, in doing so, be ever more aware of how our understanding of stewardship gets played out in our own lives.

It's not a new idea, we've been trying to do it for a long time. As recently as ten years ago, Pastor Peter Sulyok made a case for the concept of sustaining stewardship in one of the denominational resources on stewardship, and said this: "The challenges before the world and the church are many: maldistribution of wealth and acute global poverty, overconsumption and overpopulation, and ecological degradation. These problems are all around us and impact our lives in immediate ways: global climate change, hunger, cancer, trash disposal. They can be spelled out in greater specificity: erosion; depletion of ground water; 'greenhouse gasses'; debt; nuclear, chemical and biological weapons; toxic and radioactive wastes. There is a global interdependence and linkage of poverty, overpopulation, ecological degradation, and prosperity."<sup>2</sup>

And has there ever been a time when that global interdependence has been as apparent as it has been in the past several weeks as we have watched global markets tremble and fall; as we have felt the effects of unemployment and underemployment and the dramatic increase in need; as we hear the rumblings of fear and anger and confusion? Has there ever been a time when that global interdependence has been as apparent as it has been for the past two decades as we have watched wave after wave of refugees pour into refugee camps, in the wake of civil wars that have killed millions; as we have watched many more millions of children starve to death in their mothers' arms; as we have seen the fallout of inadequate or non-existent health care, the explosion of HIV/AIDS in Africa and Asia, and witnessed the ongoing toll of war and violence and brutality and terrorism.

Stewardship, justice, and sustainability are all interrelated. It is our job to discern the will of God for both the church and its faithful members, and to decide how we're going to translate our stewardship into concrete and visible ways of doing God's will, how we're going to become sustaining stewards of this gift we've been given.

When Jesus told the disciples – when Jesus tells us – to look at the birds and consider the lilies, he's not saying, "don't worry, be happy," he's saying "it's not always about you (and me, of course)." Perhaps better than anybody, Jesus understood the politics and culture of his day and time. He understood that he lived with a political system that was corrupt, driven by fear, and reliant on a strong military. He understood that he lived within a religious culture that said it was more important to be seen doing what others would consider acceptable, than to be doing what was right, to be doing what would bring in the kingdom of

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Sulyok, "Sustaining Stewardship for Life Together," PC(USA) stewardship resources, 1999.

God. And he understood that it would take all that he had to give to get us to understand it too.

I wonder if Jesus wasn't reminding the disciples of how easy it is to get mired in worry, how easy it is to idolize and expend our energy chasing what we do not have and do not need, instead of caring for all the things that really matter to God. Trusting in God's providence, God's providential care of things as numerous and insignificant as sparrows and as common as lilies, frees us to give more of ourselves in pursuit of God's reign, the reign in which everyone is equally blessed.

When we consider the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, we need to remember that they are there as powerful symbols, larger than life really, symbols of God's providential care. They are not models that we would imitate, but rather stand as reminders of the amazing grace that surrounds us and the love that upholds us through everything that life can throw at us. They remind us that we are part of the continuing chain of support and care, whether we are on the giving end or the receiving end.

And, blessedly, they remind us of the glorious beauty of this creation, and the love of God that flows through it. So, look – *really look* – at that lily the next time you have a chance, and wonder at the intricate and fragile construction of petals and leaves. Watch the birds as they head south, and marvel at the mystery of migration. Give thanks to God in as many ways as you can, including your commitment of time and money to the mission and ministry of this church. “(And) do not worry (so much) about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.” Thankfully, whatever tomorrow brings, it brings God with it. Amen.