

“From Worry to Wonder”

Sermon from Matthew 6:25-34

Given Sunday, July 28, 2021

for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

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“I tell you not to worry about your livelihood, what you are to eat or drink or use for clothing. Isn’t life more than just food? Isn’t the body more than just clothes?”

Look at the birds in the sky. They don’t sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet our God in heaven feeds them. Aren’t you more important than they? Which of you by worrying can add a moment to your lifespan? And why be anxious about clothing? Learn a lesson from the way the wildflowers grow. They don’t work; they don’t spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in full splendor was arrayed like one of these. If God can clothe in such splendor the grasses of the field, which bloom today and are thrown on the fire tomorrow, won’t God do so much more for you - you who have so little faith?

Stop worrying, then, over questions such as, ‘What are we to eat?’ or ‘What are we to drink?’ or ‘What are we to wear?’ Those without faith are always running after these things. God knows everything you need. Seek first God’s reign, and God’s justice, and all these things will be given to you besides. Enough worrying about tomorrow! Let tomorrow take care of itself. Today has troubles enough of its own.”

I was at South Beach in Newport yesterday with folks on the church campout. It was like it almost always is there for the

campout weekend - glorious, sunny, just enough breeze to cut the heat. Kids were building sandcastles and babies were rolling naked on blankets and dogs were chasing balls and a few brave souls were venturing into the waves, the water just up to their knees.

We saw horses coming up the beach, three of them, riders on their backs. We could see them coming a long way off, sort of mirage-like: they had to come closer before we could tell what those large, moving shapes were. It was like something out of a movie, these majestic animals trotting, a man and a woman, side by side, in jeans and plaid and cowboy hats on their horses, their guide on his just a little ways ahead of them.

And then, when they were very close to us, the front horse just - laid down. Like, slowed his trot to a walk, then bent his legs and lowered himself to the ground. It was sort of strange, and beautiful. The horse didn't appear injured, just looked - he looked kind of like one of the dogs on the shore, who'd been running after a tennis ball all afternoon and then finally flopped itself down on the sand. Folks around who saw just laughed, said, "Oh, he's tired!"

But his rider wouldn't have it. Apologized to the other riders - they shook their heads, "No it's fine, it's fine, we can wait" - but this guy said, "Come on, lazy horse!" and the horse got back on his feet, and let the man get back on his saddle, and started off slowly but was trotting again pretty soon. Someone near me pointed out the irony of calling the horse lazy, when what it looked like he

was, was tired - from running up and down the beach with a fully-grown person on his back.

It got me thinking about the work that animals do, the work that plants do, that we sometimes don't register as work, because it just seems to us like the natural order of things.

A bee is busy sixty hours a week to produce a thimbleful of honey. An ant is part of a complex system, where it has a job - like building roads, or finding food, or taking care of eggs, or serving as part of the defense army. There are fish who live in coral reefs who spend all day, every day, cleaning other fish of unwanted parasites or dead scales. They clean fins, tails, mouths - even of larger fish that would be predators, but this cleaner fish's job is so important that the bigger fish forgo their snack to receive those services.

So, look at the birds of the air.

I want to ask you to do a thought exercise and... pretend that this moment with Jesus here isn't just a thought exercise. Imagine yourself in the crowd, hearing this teaching for the first time. You'll not be in a sanctuary or in your home but outside. You'll maybe be seated, on a mat, or a blanket; maybe a friend or a neighbor would be nearby; maybe a child or a sibling would be sharing your blanket. You'll maybe be leaning in, listening closely - or maybe you've been listening for a while now, and you're starting to get restless - maybe the market will close soon, maybe

there are chores undone. This teacher is compelling but you'll maybe feel torn about all else that's calling to you now, too.

And he senses your restlessness - maybe not just yours, maybe others are restless, too, but maybe you feel, uh, noticed - and he says, "Look at the birds of the air."

And let's say he pauses there for a minute. Let's say he pauses there for five minutes. Look at the birds of the air, he tells you. And you do.

What do you see? It depends on where you are, of course... but chances are, you see beauty, and grace... and work.

Tiny arctic terns fly forty-four thousand miles between their winter and summer habitats. They spend about 90 days over water, and they are not good swimmers.

There's a kind of finch called a weaver bird because it weaves together grasses and small twigs and leaf fibers and makes, like, apartment complexes for birds. One source says "these organic cities can house up to 300 separate nesting pairs, each in their own unit with an entrance in the bottom."

Probably Jesus doesn't know all this when he says what he does here. But surely he's seen birds pecking at the ground for seeds and insects, surely he's seen them up early, dropping worms into their babies' open beaks.

So what is it he wants people to see when he invites them to look at the birds? To consider the wildflowers?

You know, don't you, that wildflowers pop up in surprising places - like, places where it seems like nothing should live? You've seen them sprouting through sidewalks? In Colorado, on the face of a mountain that's just sheer rock, if there's a hairline split in the rock, there's a little purple flower pushing through it. You wouldn't think it could live there. But it is persistent, set on bringing its beauty to just that spot. Learn a lesson from the way the wildflowers grow. They don't toil; they don't spin. But they do work, so that they might live. They do learn about the world around them and figure out their place in it; how they might thrive, even when conditions are harsh.

I like to imagine these people gathered to hear Jesus, busy with whatever always keeps all of us busy, invited for a moment to just pause. To look at the birds of the air. To consider the lilies. I like to imagine Jesus not rushing ahead into the rest of the lesson, but just holding that silence. Giving his listeners the space to settle into it.

And when they sit in that empty space, maybe they sense it's fullness, too - maybe for the first time in a long time, they hear the birdsong. Maybe the scent of the wildflowers drifts over to them. Maybe they notice a patch of color in the field they hadn't seen before; a nest in a nearby tree. Maybe they begin to see how every element belongs, as part of the whole; maybe they begin to understand themselves as part of that scared, moving, working

world, too. All of us, just needing our daily bread. All the world, providing it.

Here's what watching long enough does: it moves us to wonder. You might remember that in *See No Stranger*, the book we read this winter/spring, Valarie Kaur writes about wonder as our birthright. She says, "It comes easily in childhood - the feeling of watching dust motes dancing in sunlight, or climbing a tree to touch the sky, or falling asleep thinking about where the universe ends. If we are safe and nurtured enough to develop our capacity to wonder, we start to wonder about the people in our lives, too - their thoughts and experiences, their pain and joy, their wants and needs. We begin to sense that they are to themselves as vast and complex as we are to ourselves, their inner world as infinite as our own. We are gaining information about how to love them. Wonder is the wellspring for love."

So as we emerge back into some previous rhythms, as we re-engage with friends, with activity, with work, with community - maybe this is our invitation for how to do that mindfully. Maybe we don't learn not to work from birds who don't gather and flowers who don't toil and horses who lie down - maybe we learn from them precisely how to work: in ways that honor our place in the world, in ways that honor our role in our community of creatures, in ways that honor our bodies, and what they tell us. Maybe we love the world more, better, when we pay attention to it long enough, carefully enough, to learn those things from it.

The end of this scripture promises us that if we seek first God's reign, God's justice, then what has consumed us - the worry that wracks our brains, that makes us unable to hear the birdsong or see the wildflowers - it says all of that will be laid to rest, under a blanket of trust, of reassurance that the God who called all of this into being still calls each of us to thrive in it. If we learn from the sacred earth our own particular role in it - our own justice-seeking, resource-sharing, beauty-giving role - then the world starts to actually be fuller. When each one just has what they need, there is enough. There is abundance. And abundance doesn't mean no work, and beauty doesn't mean no labor, and freedom doesn't mean no concern. Abundance means working on behalf of the whole. Beauty means laboring for what is already deep inside. Freedom means not carrying the burden of the unknown future, but trusting God in each new day as it comes. Then God's reign - of abundance, and beauty, and freedom - begins to be made real among us, even as we await it, even as we work for it: we proclaim it as we pray for it; we dwell in it even as we dream it, for us, and for all the world. May it be so.