

*Based on *Matthew 6:24-33. Jesus Gives Us Our First Priority.*

**incarnational translation below*

It was eight years ago this month that I found myself lounging in the balmy land of Florida, with its sunny skies and ocean breeze. It was a particularly stressful time of my life, and I was seeking guidance on what to do next. On a morning walk around my hotel, I stopped by what looked to me to be a lake. I sat down on the grass and was moved to pray. A deep calm settled my soul in the peace that passes understanding.

As I opened my eyes, I noticed what I had missed before in all of my busy-ness: on the surface of the lake floated massive numbers of bright green lily pads, just floating ... just floating ... just floating ...

With a deep sigh and an overwhelming sense of trust in the goodness of God, I considered the lily pads, how they neither toil nor spin, how beautiful they are in their belovedness. How beautiful we – I – can be when we truly trust God to provide.

It was a moment of pure grace.

All of a sudden the hotel housekeeper comes rushing out the door, screaming at me to get away from the lake. In complete confusion, I vacillate between my moment of Zen and this clearly distressed woman, two feet in two completely different worlds, trying to figure out what in the world have I done to offend. Out of breath, panting, as she creeps close enough to speak to me in a normal voice, she finally blurts out, “There are alligators in that swamp!”

And isn't that the truth.

What a perfect comeback to Jesus in our Lesson for today. Sure, Jesus, we might say. All this “Don't Worry, Be Happy” may sound really great for you. But what about the alligators!

And we would be right. Because this Lesson, in all of its wisdom, can be dangerous, and not in a good way. Do not worry about what you will eat, to someone who just lost their job or their spouse or their home is too much like an alligator in the lake. Do not worry about what you will drink, to the desert-crossing migrant fleeing violence in their homeland is too much like an alligator in the lake. Do not worry about where you will live, to the two-income minimum wage but still not a living wage family is too much like an alligator in the lake.

“I was already cross, and this made it worse!” we said in our Teach the Preacher study this week. “What a bunch of sanctimonious trite.”

And that is true. If those who have wealth and privilege – including us – co-opt this teaching of Jesus in order to keep hungry people hungry and thirsty people thirsty and unhoused people under a bridge along our southern border out of our country, then The Way of Jesus is nothing more than an alligator in the swamp with bright green lily pads as cover for our devotion to the lord of wealth instead of the lord of life and love.

That is *not* The Way of Jesus.

Remember the audience of Matthew's Gospel, itself: a well-established, highly educated, law-abiding stable congregation in Antioch, Syria. You might even go so far as to call the audience of Matthew's Gospel the first century version of white middle class North American Presbyterians. The audience of Matthew's Gospel is *not* those who struggle on a daily basis for their bread. It is, rather, those who yes, do have struggles, but when it comes to basic necessities really do have enough, even more than enough, and are confused about where to place their loyalties. Jesus, through Matthew's Gospel, is saying to them, *you have so much, but you are so scared ... stop it!*

But that is not all. The audience of Matthew's Gospel may seem more stable than most when it comes to the bare necessities, but they, too, have been shaken by world events. The central symbol of their religious and political and economic and social life is their Temple in Jerusalem. And that central symbol of political and economic and social stability has been attacked and finally destroyed. For the audience of Matthew's Gospel, everything they thought they could depend upon for political and social and economic stability is crumbling all around them.

Yes, the audience of Matthew's Gospel may have enough to eat and drink and wear. But they are scared, and rightfully so. The alligators really are out to get them, and they do not know what to do about it.

The truth is, I hear that same fear from so many of you here at SPC and across the nation and globe. Yes, we are doing okay, most of us. We are getting by. We have made it this far by faith. But there is this thing hovering over us, this sense of living on a precipice, and it is not just because of the pandemic. Violence and the threat of more violence has seeped into our psyche, along with the awareness that the economic and political and social stability we had hoped for this year has been intermittent at best. The truth is, if we are not worried, we are not paying attention.

Which leads us to the heart of what I think Jesus is getting at here. *First and foremost*, Jesus says, *devote yourselves* – plural, meaning all y'all, as a congregation – *first and foremost, devote yourselves to the reign of God, the Beloved Community, the Divine Realignment of work, wealth, and land. First and foremost*, Jesus is saying, *get your own act together as a congregation. Only then will you be prepared – collectively – to respond to what unfolds all around you.*

Which is exactly what we are doing here at SPC. Our job, as a congregation, is to be *a provisional demonstration of the reign of God on earth as it is in heaven*. Our job, as a congregation, is to worry less about whether or not our pews are packed or our children's program is better than the Baptists' down the street and to worry instead about the lives of others who do not live with the certainty of daily bread and a living wage. That is what our Alternative Christmas Market is about. That is what our support for ministries along the southern border is about. That is what our overnight shelter is about. That is what our support for Shepherdstown Shares is about. Our job, as a congregation is to be the vehicle by which food, drink, and clothing are delivered to those who cannot depend on this economy to provide it. And we *are* doing our job as a congregation!

The promise is, as Jesus says, that when we do these things, when we in the church seek to serve as a provisional demonstration of the reign of God on earth as it is in heaven, everything else will fall into place. Including our political and economic turmoil. Which is not to say that if you and I just pray hard enough, everything will be okay. It just means that if we re-commit ourselves to the lord we should be serving all along – in The Way of Jesus – we will know in our bones, *as a congregation*, how to live faithfully, with integrity,

and with a vision for justice and peace, through whatever political and economic and social turmoil is yet to come. When we recommit ourselves to the Reign of Love, above all else, the most meaningful gifts of life, in all of their abundance, *will* pile up for us over and over and over again.

Let the church say, Amen!

**incarnational translation of Matthew 6:24-33*

Jesus says,

“We do not have the capacity to devote ourselves to two different lords.

Trying to do so divides our spirits in half.

We either hate the one and long for the other,
or cling to the one and actively insult the other.

For example, we simply do not have the capacity
to serve both God and wealth.

If we try, over time, as I said,
we will end up either hating the one and longing for the other,
or clinging to the one and actively insulting the other.

I want you to devote yourselves to God!

This is why I am telling all y’all to liberate your spirit
from such soul-crushing anxiety about all the “shoulds.”
*I should eat this exotic food, I should drink that fine wine,
I should wear this designer label.*
Your spirit knows better.

Look at the birds of the air;
they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns,
and yet your Abba God feeds them.
Their value is in their belovedness,
not in keeping up with the Joneses.
The same is true for you.

Be honest.

Does all of that “shoulding” on yourself give you a better life?

And all those designer labels? Give me a break.
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 clothes even the hay of the field with a glorious glow –
hay! which grows in glory for a few months and then is baled up for horse fodder, don't you think God will do even more for you?

Where is your confidence!

Really, please, don't get so worked up about all the finery you think you need.
That is for those who devote themselves to the lord of wealth, instead of God.
Truly, your Abba God knows everything you *truly* need.

First and foremost, devote yourselves to the reign of God,
and the right way of living in relationship with God,
one another, and all of creation.

If you do that, the most meaningful gifts of life, in all of their abundance,
will pile up for you over and over again