

Let's talk about money

Matthew 6:24-34

February 27, 2011

Jesus has a word for you today. Actually, two words: Don't worry.

Don't worry!

But I'm not sure with these rising fuel prices if I'm going to be able to ...

Don't worry!

But if I'm laid off ...

Don't worry!

I'm on a fixed income and inflation is surely going to cut into my ...

Don't worry!

Will there even be a job there for me when I graduate?

Don't worry!

Don't worry about what you are going to eat. Don't worry about what you are going to drink. Don't worry about what you are going to wear. Don't worry.

Don't worry about money.

Let's talk about money. We've talked about sex. We've talked about revenge. We've talked about divorce. We've talked about politics -- about loving enemies. We may as well talk about money!

Except that money is the one thing we're not supposed to talk about. We don't talk about money in church. We ask for it, but we don't talk about it! We use great caution when it comes to money matters. We make every effort to protect your privacy. What you give to the church is your business. Only our bookkeeper knows what you give. I don't even know what you give to the church.

And what you do with your money outside the church? Well, that is certainly not up for discussion! Because how much money you have and what you choose to do with your money is a personal matter, a private matter, a matter between you ... and you! Right?

Right? Why are we so private about our money? Why are we so protective of it? Why are we so resistant to talking -- together, in church -- about what we should or shouldn't do with our money?

Because it's mine! I earned it! It's mine!

Isn't that a fair description of how we feel? My money and what I choose to do with it is nobody else's business! It's mine! Maybe that's why we need to talk about it, because it is so dear to us, because we hold it so close to our hearts.

The biblical practice of tithing, setting aside the first ten percent of income for a special, holy, purpose, is not really about making money for religious institutions. It's not a tax, but a spiritual discipline, and as with all spiritual disciplines, its purpose is to keep me focussed, to help me remember. I bring the first fruits of my labor as an offering to God, so that I will remember. Remember what? Remember the Lord! Remember the one from whom all good gifts come, the one to whom everything belongs, the one to whom I belong.

Without that discipline, without some such discipline, we so easily forget. We forget who it is who provides for us. We forget who it is to whom we owe everything we have. We forget God. And that's why we need to talk about money.

Jesus talks about money. Jesus talks a lot about money! Because money is not a peripheral issue. Because money is so much tied up with the comings and goings of our lives every day. Because every day we spend it, earn it, count it, protect it, think about it, dream about it, wish for more of it.

Money takes up a lot of space in our lives. Money takes up a lot of space in our souls. Think of how much care, attention, energy, passion, desire, concern we give to our money! But care and attention and energy and passion and desire and concern are matters of spirit!

So money is a spiritual issue, a vitally important spiritual issue. It is simply wrong, wrong-headed, to pretend we can compartmentalize our lives. Over here I have my religious concerns and activities, and over here I have the rest of my life -- my work, my money, my social life, my politics. Hogwash!

Your spiritual life, your life as a believer, your life as a follower of Jesus, your life with God and for God, your life lived by God's light and in God's way, is lived day by day, situation by situation, relationship by relationship ... out there! Either you live with courage and joy and generosity and compassion and peace, or you live with fear and bitterness, protecting yourself against injury, protecting yourself against loss, always anxious, always worried. That's the spiritual issue, and money is a big, big part of it.

So what does Jesus say about money? Don't worry. Jesus says, "Don't worry." That's what Jesus says at this time, in this place, to these particular people.

Who is he talking to? Not to Pharisees. Not to teachers or lawyers. Not to bankers or rich merchants or government officials.

Jesus is talking to the people of the crowd gathered around him on the hillside, the people who have come out of the towns and villages to find him, the *am haaretz* -- the people of the land, the *hoi polloi* -- the common people, people like you and me, people who are tempted to worry, people who do worry, every day, about making ends meet, about making through next month or next week, some of them, maybe even many of them, living just day to day, on the edge of survival.

To them, to people such as these, Jesus says, "Don't worry." And he doesn't mean worrying about having enough to buy that new car you've been eyeing or having enough to take the vacation you have planned for this summer. He means worrying about the very basics: food and drink and clothes. Don't worry about the food and drink you need to stay alive or the clothes you need to cover your body. God will provide!

God will provide. God does provide.

Look at the birds! They don't plant seeds, They don't have pantries filled with food. But they have plenty to eat. God provides for them.

Look at the wildflowers! They don't have sewing machines. They don't shop at Walmart. But they are beautifully adorned. God provides for them.

And you are worth more to God, so much more, than birds or flowers! God will provide for you. Don't worry. God will provide for you.

That's what Jesus says to the people on the hillside and to people like them. But to other people, at other times, Jesus still has things to say about money, but different things.

Jesus talked about money once with a particularly wealthy young man. Did Jesus tell him not to worry? No way! Because he's not worried! Because he has no reason to worry! He doesn't have to worry at all about where his next meal may come from or if he will have something to wear.

And that's the problem. He's not worried. He's sure he doesn't have to worry. He thinks he has everything under control and can take care, good care, of himself, thank you.

What does Jesus say to him? "Go, sell all you have and give the money away to the poor!" Why? So that this young man, this young man so precious to God, will have the blinders removed from his soul. So he will see, so he will learn, so he will know, how much he depends on God, for everything! So he will learn to depend on God and thank God and love God, learn to live for God and in communion with God.

You see, there are two sides to this coin, two sides to the serious spiritual risk money poses. On the one side are the people who think they're in trouble because they don't have it. And on the other side are the people who think they are all set because they do have it.

But both kinds of people are mistaken. Both kinds of people have forgotten God. Both kinds of people have forgotten that it is God who provides, that it is God on whom all of us, all of us alike, rich and poor and everyone in between, depend.

Jesus has already told this crowd, just a little bit earlier, the key to a healthy spirit, the key to a life of courage and joy and generosity and peace. Pray this, he said: "Give us this day our daily bread." Ask God to provide ... one day at a time.

The people of Israel learned that lesson in the wilderness, where they were sustained by the manna God provided them each morning. When they tried to hoard some, save a little for the next day, just to be sure, just in case God forgot and didn't show up, it spoiled. I am sure that Jesus' prayer intentionally draws on Jewish memories of that time in the wilderness. We come to God, with open hands and grateful spirits, day by day by day by day, living on what God provides. Give us, today, the food we need ... today.

Can you pray that way? Can you live that way? It is a beautiful thing! There are few things so beautiful as an open-handed and open-hearted spirit, brimming with confidence that God will provide, overflowing with gratitude for all God does provide.

But when we worry, the hands begin to shake, and our hearts begin to quail, and we shut out God. And when we think we have matters under control, when we know we can provide, our hands and our hearts close tight, and we shut out God.

In both cases, we become preoccupied, preoccupied with money, preoccupied with what we have or what we don't have, and we have little passion or energy or love left for what really matters. Be concerned with the Kingdom of God, Jesus says, not all the rest! God will take care of all the rest.

Be concerned, above all else, with the Kingdom of God. Direct your energy and your passion and your love toward doing what God wants, toward living with God and for God and as God intends. Because you can't have it both ways. You can't worry about money and love God. The worry itself betrays your lack of trust. The worry itself proves your love is not genuine. One or the other, money or God, will preoccupy your soul. One or the other, money or God, will occupy your heart. You cannot serve both God and money.

So, love God ... and don't worry!