

Seek First The Kingdom of God  
Matthew 5-7  
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Our New Testament lesson this morning comes from The Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is speaking to the disciples. It's at the end of the sixth chapter verses 25-33 – one of my favorite sections of all the Scripture. “Jesus says, ‘Therefore I tell you do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food? And the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air. They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns. And yet, your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying at a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field and how they grow. They neither toil nor spin, and yet I tell you – even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass with the field which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven will he not much more clothe you—oh you of little faith? Therefore, do not worry saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the gentiles who strive for all these things, and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom in his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.’” This is the Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

Please pray with me. Lord we're grateful in these moments to consider your Word and to be here in this place together and I pray that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts will be acceptable to you, oh Lord, our rock and redeemer. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Well I kind of hate to interrupt all this great music with a sermon, but we're going to do it anyway. Thanks Tom and Barry, and band and summer choir – it's been great. I could go home now and feel great. I appreciate it very much. And I just want to say also as a moment of personal privilege – thank you so much for these last almost four years. We have indeed enjoyed being here. I want to look past just the last year to all four and I want to thank all of you who have joined together in faith formation, and service and the military outreach – all those good things. Thank you very much.

So this will probably date me and some of us, but if you remember back to Mad Magazine – do you remember Alfred E. Newman? He would be there on the cover and say “What, me worry?” What a great perspective on life, but his perspective was not everybody's perspective. We live in

a world where things are constantly changing. Frankly, it's easy to worry. I know that I've never had to preach a sermon in order to convince people to worry – it just seems to happen all on its own. We worry about our kids, we worry about our finances, about our health, about our safety. There are thousands of things to worry about and we kind of do that naturally. I know my mom used to call me a worry wart and I've got to own up to it that it can be a challenge. It's been a challenge for me. But worry's a problem because it doesn't contribute to any creative solution, to anything that's going on. It doesn't change the world around us, it doesn't change the relationships we have – as a matter of fact, in some ways, it makes it even worse as we descend into worrying and allow it to capture us in that place. But change continues to come to us, and Jesus invites us to consider God's loving care for us through all of life's circumstances, all of life's changes. And he lodges this teaching right in the context in the middle of The Sermon on the Mount. Now Sermon on the Mount is chapters 5, 6 and 7 of the Gospel of Matthew and in these three chapters Jesus sets forth a radical view of life and the gospel and a radical view of what God expects from us.

In chapter 5 and most of chapter 6 Jesus teaches about who we are in relation to God and God's revealed purposes. We see the heart of God in the beatitudes - the great reversals of those values of society where Jesus says 'blessed are the meek, blessed are the poor, blessed are those who seek God.' And then we also see the law of God and God's true intentions for this when Jesus is rough on us. He says, 'not only do I say don't murder, but don't be angry with someone. I don't say don't just commit adultery, but don't even lust after someone.' So Jesus is really getting to the very heart of what the law is intended to say to us. And then in chapter 7 Jesus turns to our relationships with others in a very public view of faith. Now those of us who have been studying scripture through the eyes of Ken Bailey over the past few years (I just love Ken's stuff) – Dr. Bailey said in teachings in scripture, unlike in western literature which starts and makes an introduction and brings the climax at the end, Jesus often teaches us as prophets do into the climax and then out of the climax. So I think the very center of the Sermon on the Mount is this text here. Because as we think about what it means to live perfectly, which we can't in relation to the law, or perfectly in relation to other people (and we know we're going to fail on both of those) – Jesus says in the middle of it 'don't worry. God cares for you. Don't worry about clothing, don't worry about food, don't worry about your relationships with others. God cares for us.' But, he says 'seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you as well.'

So as we move through this text in terms of both worry and in terms of God's kingdom that verb *to seek* is at the very center of things and that's what Jesus invites us to do in this. That as we seek God's kingdom first and God's righteousness – the things that we worry about will not necessarily pass away but will be given a different perspective on them that allows us to navigate those changes of life around us. Now as I said earlier, and we all know, there is a lot to worry about. And I love to look at the compassionate Jesus throughout the gospels – how Jesus came alongside people and fed people who were hungry, and clothed people who were naked, and comforted people who were distressed about a variety of different things. So we see in Jesus's heart the desire to stand beside people. It's not just a 'don't worry' sort of thing. It's 'I'm coming along side of you and I am embodying for you what it means not to worry.'

Now as I reflected upon this text, I thought 'we sure live in an age of anxiety,' but I also think, 'well maybe every age is an age of anxiety.' Maybe that's why this is such a timeless teaching because people have struggled with it from the moment Jesus got these words out to even now, and to years beyond as well. But again the great problem with worry is that it doesn't get us to where we need to go. And so it's not a call to minimize our situations. It's a call instead to maximize our trust so that our perspective moves from focusing on the things we cannot do anything about to fellowship with a God who stands alongside us and offers both transformation and strength in our times of need. I mean real troubles are real troubles. People are hungry, people are naked, people are discouraged, people are confused and Jesus constantly shows us that he understands us by standing beside people in their time of need. But Jesus says in response to that there is one thing to seek. He says seek first the kingdom of God – the very first thing your response is don't descend so much into more worry, but seek first the kingdom of God. And this is in a sense is what I call a response command. Because Jesus says 'seek first God's kingdom', and we do that out of the context of knowing that we have been sought out already by God. That it's not just God saying "You do something in this." We know that Christ has come to us to bear our burdens. Jesus said 'I came to seek – that was the purpose of Jesus's ministry and so he had sought us, and invites us then to seek him in return. As far back as Jeramiah 29 in the Prophets, the Prophet says 'you will seek me and you will find me' – the God is available to us. It's not a game of hide and seek. It's that God has come to us and said 'because I am seeking you. When you turn from me you will find me standing there.'

But it's also what I would call an umbrella command because we're also called to seek out our neighbor, and to love our neighbor as our selves. Even as we love God with our heart, soul, mind and strength, we love our neighbors as ourselves. And we are called to do justice, and to love

kindness, and to walk humbly with God. One of Jesus's most severe teachings in Matthew 25, he says that when you went and visited those who were in prison, when you help those who are sick, when you cloth the naked, you did this as if you did it to me. So the honest statement about this is that it's not an invitation to a party. It is indeed a challenge of a lifetime, but this challenge is to come first.

Many years ago Lexus was doing their billboards about the relentless pursuit of it was either excellence or perfection (I don't remember which) – and soon as Lexus went through this series of billboards Buick came out with one. It was a picture of a Buick and it said 'Something else for Lexus to relentlessly pursue.' I just loved that – it was kind of in your face, a little smack on that. And as Jesus says 'seek first the kingdom' he's inviting us in that same way – to relentlessly pursue our relationship with God because there we find the antidote for our worry, the peace that passes understanding, the purpose in how to make decisions with what we own, what we have, how we spend our time. And Jesus points us then to the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is a huge concept, and Jesus teaches almost exclusively about it. He doesn't have a lot to say about the church. The church comes later and Paul and Peter and John help us figure out what this means in relationship to these local bodies that we live in. But Jesus says look toward the kingdom of God. And the first thing he says about it is that the kingdom of God is a personal kingdom. He says 'your heavenly Father knows you and loves you and seeks you out. And Jesus constantly raises up and points out the personal concern of God for us. As lovely as the birds of the air are, as beautiful as the flowers of the field are, Jesus says 'you are of much more value than they.' So in the vastness of the Universe, in the beauty of the world there is a personal touch of God to each and every one of us. And Jesus says 'I love you' and that's what he invites us to experience in the personal kingdom of God.

But it's more than just that because while Jesus loves us, Jesus loves not only us – Jesus loves the whole world. So the kingdom of God as well as being personal is also a just kingdom. Seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness – this way of living that points to God's love and points to God's justice and God's mercy and the many things we see all throughout scripture of God caring for the poor and the oppressed. It's a just kingdom. God loves us, there is room for us – but there is room for others as well.

Then finally the kingdom of God is a compelling kingdom in that Christ's kingdom is what we are to lean into and live into all our lives. When we're young and trying to figure out what our life is supposed to look like, Christ guides us into that future. In our middle years when we are at

the peak of our accomplishments, in our families, in our working years Christ is there and says ‘seek the kingdom here as well.’ When we’re older and we’re looking at eternity closer than our birth years, Jesus says ‘I am waiting for you, I have a room prepared for you.’ And the only way our hearts find peace in the midst of all those yearly changes and status changes and all the other changes we have is when they’re given to God and God’s kingdom. Because when we seek that we see and we experience more deeply than we could ever know the love of God for us.

One of the things that pastors experience as we come and go in congregations – and members do this as well, probably many of you have been in several congregations throughout your lifetime – is that our relationships with one another change over the years. And I like to liken this to the concept of a relay race – that we hold the baton in a certain team in a certain way for a certain time, and sometimes it’s a 400 meter sprint (although I’ve never been very fast. I was never invited onto that team), or it’s a mile, or it’s even longer than that – but we hold the baton in a place for a time. And so our relationship with one another as deep as it gets nonetheless does change. And I want to say it’s been a privilege to be part of this team – this team of congregation and staff and session and to have held a baton with you for a time. After today our relationship changes. I will always be your friend, you’re always welcome at our home – just not all of you at the same time. But I will no longer be your pastor. And the wondrous thing – and the wonderful thing about the kingdom is that’s enough – that’s enough for us to be friends in Christ. Jesus said to his disciples as he was giving them the upper room discourse before he went to be crucified – he said ‘I no longer call you servants but now I call you friends.’ Now just to be clear I have never called you servants, but we are friends. We move into that relationship now. But what is most important is that our relationship with God does not change. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The race continues to be run. Paul said ‘I press on to the upward call of Christ.’ And so we continue to press on – not always in the same congregation, but certainly in the kingdom of God. We are still working for the purposes of Christ in the world.

And so we run and we seek and we serve and we love because he first loved us. And I hope that through this in the days past and the days to come that our vision for God will continue to grow because I have always believed whether it’s preaching, or teaching, or encouraging just laying out the ‘shoulds’ – we should be this or we should be that – doesn’t really do a very good job. We all know what we should be doing – that as our vision for the greatness and the love and the companionship of Christ increases – that’s where change happens in our lives. That’s where encouragement and strength come. And so beyond worry, beyond worldliness there is a

kingdom, there is a savior – he is our savior, we are in his kingdom. His name is Jesus. He is God with us forever. Thanks be to God.