

The Way of Wisdom
Luke 12:22-34
Luke 12:18-21
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Luke 12:22-34

He said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest?”

“Consider the lilies, 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 so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

This season of Lent, we’re exploring the way of Jesus. This names, of course, what we don’t talk about very often: that there are a LOT of ways we could go besides the way of Jesus. We have tons of choices of how we live our lives, and too often we go through our days on auto-pilot. To be a Christian requires awareness, intention, or to borrow from the Buddhists, mindfulness. For when

we're *not* mindful about the choices we make – well, we're likely to veer down lesser, even dangerous paths.

Where does the way of Jesus take us? So far we've explored the path of blessedness, the road of generosity, the way of resilience. Today, let's embark on the road to wisdom.

The way of wisdom. Sounds noble, doesn't it? But what does it *really* mean to be wise? The world is full of advice. "Be all that you can be." "Just do it." "Have it your way." "Think different." Some of you on the older side remember the scene in the movie *The Graduate*. Starry-eyed Dustin Hoffman has finished school; he's searching for his true calling in life. At his graduation party, a wealthy friend of the family sidles up to him and whispers in his ear the secret to a successful life: "Plastics."

Plastics. There are "wise guys" everywhere, aren't there? But rarely do we stop to think about what wisdom really looks like. About what life is really *for*. So today, let's look at what Jesus has to say.

"Do not worry about your life, about what you will eat, or what you will wear." "Do not be afraid." "Do not be anxious." Jesus *nails it* – we spend so much of our lives in a state of worry, anxiety, preoccupation. Obviously, I can't read your mind, but I know my own well enough. I leap from worry to worry to worry: What did I forget to do? Who did I neglect to call? How am I going to get everything on my to-do list done? Why haven't I spent more time with my father? Why haven't I followed up with friends? When will we plan Annie's wedding? How will we pay for it? Will we ever get our back patio re-done? How can I touch up the kitchen cabinets? I'm not proud of this – oh, I am not! But I share it with you because I suspect I'm not alone in having an endless loop of worries.

Maybe that's not true for you. Maybe it's the reverse. For some of you, you don't worry because you're *on top of it*. You've mastered the challenge. You're good to go. You have stored up everything you need so you don't *have*

to worry anymore. Which is, of course, just the other side of the same coin. Now, I hadn't noticed this, but when Dave Tolmie spoke at this week's Wednesday morning Lent service, he pointed out that just before Jesus tells us not to be anxious, not to worry, he's *just* gotten done questioning those who have staved off anxiety by putting their stock in money or possessions. Listen to these verses that come just before the "do not be anxious" instructions. Jesus says:

Luke 12:18-21

"Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God."

From Jesus' point of view, trying to protect ourselves from anxiety – trying to hedge our bets by accumulating wealth - isn't the answer either. It will always take you down a false road of security. The only real security we have, Jesus reminds us, is found in the providence of God. That is true wisdom: investing our security in God, and God alone. But how? How do we stay on that path?

The first thing Jesus tells us – though often we read right over it – is this: "Consider the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. ... And 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."

How does considering the birds and the lilies get us on the right path? This may sound simple, but it's shifting from worrying about what we're

doing to focusing on what God's already done. Let me say it again: when we shift our focus from our own activity to what God has done, we're able to rest, to trust, to rely on the providence of God. In other words, we know that God is God, and we're not.

Let me share a story. One of my friends, Ted Wardlaw – now a seminary president – testifies to this. He remembers a fall day years ago when he was a crazy-busy pastor with a working wife and two small girls. He says:

“On a particular Saturday, I had spent a good portion of the day raking the leaves from a host of tall trees in our backyard into a huge pile. My envisioned next step was to have stuffed all those leaves into many leaf bags to be placed on the curb out front, but the sun had hastened to the horizon and then set. I had to stop.

“About this time in the darkening evening, my younger daughter came outside and wanted to jump with me into the blanket of leaves. We hurled ourselves at that blanket for maybe a half hour until we were both exhausted. Then we lay on it, looking up at the night sky. She suggested a game. We would not say a word until she called ‘time,’ and then we would report to one another what we saw and heard during that time of silence. Over multiple turns, we reported our discoveries to one another – a shooting star, a plane in a landing pattern, a dog barking over the wall in a neighbor's back yard, a twig snapping, a horn blowing, an owl somewhere asking the plaintive question, ‘Who?’

“I think back, from time to time, to this occasion when Claire and I were listening hard and looking up so intently; and how richly we were rewarded by it. We were fellow detectives of divinity, noticing – in an all-too-rare moment – the presence of wonder.”ⁱ

When he realized he wasn't going to finish, Ted could have been anxious ... he could have been tied up in knots ... he could have ignored his little girl.

Instead, he refocused, to consider the birds of the air ... to consider the lilies of the field ... to consider the providence of God.

That's the first step on the path of wisdom. The second step is this: remember that life is short, and you can't take it with you. It's counter-intuitive, but remembering our mortality may be one of the most important keys to wisdom. This, I believe, is what Jesus is getting at when he says, "God said to the rich man, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God."

I know I've talked a lot about my sister Karen's bout with cancer, so I beg your forbearance for bringing it up yet again. But one of the things Karen learned with cancer is how *clarifying* it was about what mattered and what didn't. Before cancer – BC – she worried over everything, hurling herself at work, perseverating over her kids, anxious about money. But having cancer changed everything. It made her more aware, more intentional, even, she says, more grateful. In one of her first sermons to her congregation after treatment, this is what she said:

“When I first got the diagnosis of cancer ... my first thought wasn't, 'Thank you, Jesus.' I can't actually tell you my first thought because it's not appropriate for polite company. I thought of my kids, and what they've been through, losing their dad last October. I thought, they cannot be orphaned. They just can't. It turns out I was lucky to have a great prognosis – I am painfully aware that not everyone does with this insidious disease.”

Over time Karen actually became grateful – to the point where she wrote – believe it or not - a “top-ten list of great things about having cancer.” Here it is:

10. Having time to read the paper every morning in bed.

9. Watching TV for the first time in 20 years – sitcoms and Ohio State football. ...
8. My yard looks better than it has in years, thanks to [church] helpers.
7. Losing 40 pounds without even trying.
6. All the cards, notes, and meals.
5. Hearing from people I haven't seen for twenty years.
4. 1-on-1 time with [friends] who took me to appointments.
3. 1-on-1 time with each of my brothers and sister who took turns coming to take care of me.
2. No one expected *anything*. Instead, the rest of the staff and church leaders took it all.
1. Learning to expect less of myself, and know that it's OK – not only because there was really nothing I could do, but because at the end of the day, it isn't having everything crossed off my to-do list that matters. It's not my success or hard work or achievements that matter. It's living in the loving arms of God.

“That,” she says, “is why I'm grateful I had cancer.”

Karen goes on to offer this caveat:

“I would never tell someone else with cancer that they should be grateful. Telling anyone else to be grateful is beyond presumptuous; it's cruel. ... There are plenty of burdens people carry that we don't even know. So if you are out there hurting, please do not hear me saying, ‘You ingrate, you should be grateful.’ No, you should be comforted.

“The truth is there were times when I was anxious and afraid, especially when the side-effects were hard to handle. I would lie in bed and remember the prayers, all the prayers from people in the church, and friends far away, and it was like a blanket of peace would cover me. I felt the comfort of God's loving arms.”ⁱⁱ

“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” Jesus says. And where your heart is ... where your heart is what really matters after all. It’s all that really matters.

A few weeks ago, Renee Borkowski had the sad privilege of speaking at her beloved father’s funeral. This is how she opened her remarks. “Dad wasn’t the richest person in earthly terms, but he was one of the richest people I know.” In the end, isn’t that what we want for our lives, and the lives of those we love?

The road to wisdom. It isn’t always easy. But it is worth every step that we take, as we learn to trust that our deepest security lies not in our self-protection ... our finest treasure lies not in the riches of this world ... our most life-giving joy lies not in our accomplishments or accumulation or achievements. Why? Because God has already provided the most cherished gift we ever need: the gift of love, manifest in countless ways, culminating in the most priceless treasure of all: Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who leads us on the way.

ⁱ Theodore J. Wardlaw, Introduction, *Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary*, Fall 2015.

ⁱⁱ Karen Chakoian, preached at First Presbyterian Church, Granville, OH, November 22, 2016.