

8 Epiphany – A – SJ – Look at the Birds of the Air

Matthew 6:24-34 2/27/11

The Rev. Canon Lance Beizer St. John's Episcopal Church, Salisbury, CT

Listen to his words again:

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?

“If only life were that easy!” we might well respond when Jesus opens his little sermon to questions from his audience. Living in the Northwest Corner gives us ample opportunity to see the needs of those neighbors of ours with fewer resources than we. Fr. John told us a few weeks back about some of those who have come to him this winter for financial assistance. Farther afield we have been inundated this winter with stories about folks in Connecticut towns rendered homeless by some of the unfortunate consequences of a particularly snowy January, collapsing roofs not used to so much weight. And we only have to pay attention to our news broadcasts and newspapers to find ourselves empathizing with the plights of the many, many people in other parts of the world whose lives depend precariously on the good will and donations of others – Haiti, Pakistan, the Sudan, and on and on and on. Having lived as long as I did in California I personally knew at least three people who lost homes to earthquakes and landslides. One home I had actually been in for a housewarming when my friends first moved in.

No, I'm sorry to report that we really can't sit back and let God – not George, as an old commercial suggested – do it. Scott Peck, Episcopalian, psychiatrist, and author of many influential and best-selling books about the intersection of religion and psychology, tells the story of one of his patients, who, in the course of an appointment, mentioned that he had run out of gas the previous evening. Peck asked him whether that happened often. “Naw, only three or four times a year,” was the response. “Well now,” said Peck once again, “I've been driving about 40 years and I've never run out of gas!” The patient said that his car had a problem with the gas gauge. Whenever it was down to a quarter full or so it just wasn't very accurate; it couldn't be trusted. “You might want to think about the implications of driving around with that problem; you could run into a real problem one day,” said the doctor. “Maybe you ought to get it fixed.” Well, the patient left and, since he was visiting Peck's office in southern Connecticut, he used a lot of the gas in his tank getting there and back home to Massachusetts. And it wasn't too long before he had to drive up to Boston on business. When he got there, the gauge indicated that there wasn't much gas left, even as he drove into a gas station to buy a map of the city. But he didn't get gas! Soon he found himself on top of Beacon Hill, in a maze of one-way streets, hopelessly lost, and.....out of gas. He put the car into neutral and, praying

that God would pull him through once again, he coasted down the hill, through the winding streets, until he arrived, literally not able to move another foot, directly in front of a gas pump at the foot of the hill. At that point he finally got it. God surely had far too many other things to do to take care of him all the time. It just wasn't fair. So he got the car fixed....

Though it may seem like it, Jesus' message in this sermon of his is simply not about how we can abdicate responsibility for our own care. Indeed, Jesus does speak of how beautiful God clothes the lilies of the field, and adds: "But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you...?" Yes, God makes the lilies just glorious, but not impervious to age. They will die in their course, as we also shall. The difference between them and us, though, is that the lilies of the field have no need of food, shelter and clothing that must be made by human hands. **We do**, and we can't expect God to grow them, build them and sew them for us.

And that fact – that our survival depends upon our producing the means of that survival – is a key to what Jesus is really telling us in his sermon. By contrast, there are many preachers who try to persuade their congregations that what Jesus means in this morning's gospel when he tells people that if they "strive first for the kingdom of God," "all these things will be given ... as well," is an assurance that God will reward good Christians with everything their hearts may desire. We've all seen far too much pain and suffering in the world to believe that the measure of how good a Christian a person is can ever be how much money and fame he can accumulate. That's a notion that could hardly have been in the mind of someone who has said that he had nowhere to lay his head. And that assertion seems mighty inconsistent with the admonition at the top of today's gospel that "you cannot serve both God and wealth."

No, what Jesus is really saying in this passage, it seems to me, is really the reverse of the message of those preachers. **Stop** worrying about yourself and your own bank account. For if your focus is on what you can do for **you**, you can hardly "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength – or love your neighbor as yourself." The passage is not about what one can expect to **get** from God at all. What instead it is about is why we should turn our attention away from ourselves towards God and our neighbor. Like the young man in Scott Peck's story we have the capability of taking care of our own needs. More importantly, however, we also have the capability, if we are alert to their needs, to become the means by which God may take care of the needs of others.

I think Scott Bader-Saye, in his book *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear* puts it about as well as can be put:

When we think of practicing generosity or charity, we have to be careful neither to imagine ourselves as our brother's keeper (thus asserting a control over the other that is not rightly ours), nor to suggest that since God is our brother's keeper, we have no moral

obligations. As we have already seen, the abundance of provision comes from God alone, but God relies on us to participate in God's abundance in such a way that we do not hoard the blessing. We have a part in keeping the blessing flowing, becoming a conduit for God's abundance. Which is to say we are called to be our brother's brother, our sister's sister, so that God can be their keeper.

Some of us bear in one way or other – directly or from our parents – scars from the deprivations of the Great Depression; others of us have suffered from the problems of the economy of the past few years. Still, for the most part we can hardly even begin to imagine the horrors of the lives of some of those in third-world countries. If we can turn outward rather than inward – if we can contemplate the needs of our neighbors rather than the sense of scarcity in ourselves to which we have all too often found ourselves drawn – we can go a long way towards fulfilling our role as the body of Christ, and thereby truly do God's work in the world. Likewise, as another way of honoring the responsibility God has given us, whatever the cause of the climate changes that have become all too evident in the world around us, we must also, both individually and as a society, do all we can to be good stewards of the world God has entrusted to us.

AMEN