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Matthew 6:25 – 33

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#digzpc Simplicity

Do not worry about your life. Don't worry about what you will eat. Don't worry about what you will drink. Don't worry about what you will wear. "Who, by worrying, has added a single hour to their life?" It's hard to argue with Jesus here, isn't it? I mean, how many of us don't hear these words and say, "Absolutely, that's good stuff, Jesus." We should totally stop worrying about these things. In fact, I'm even going to write that down. "Don't worry about my life, about what I will eat or drink or wear." Then we fold up the piece of paper, put it in our pocket and go about our day, full of worries.

It's not that it's bad advice, of course, but as someone who is a lifetime worrier, I gotta' say it's just that it's nearly impossible to put into practice. As I've told some of you before from the time I was knee high to a grasshopper I've been someone who worries. Before I went to kindergarten my mother tells me I was incredibly worried that I was going to be the only one who didn't know my letters. From there, of course, the worries just increased. I was worried about getting picked last at the playground, about how many pimples I had on my face, whether or not a girl liked me, whether or not I would get a scholarship, whether my heartbeat was normal, whether I'd find a wife, whether I'd like being a pastor, whether we should come to Zionsville (the jury's still out!), whether we'd find the right house, and on and on the worries go. And so, yes, I love these words from Jesus about not worrying, I love the words of Paul in Philippians that says we shouldn't worry about anything whatsoever, but in all honesty I have found them difficult to really put into practice.

It's not for lack of trying, it just seems, well, unrealistic. Kind of like a pipe dream, really. My guess is that many of us have done our best to try and stop worrying. We've told ourselves again and again to stop it, we've tried to take scripture passages like these seriously, but we've found it impossible to will ourselves into not worrying. And I gotta' tell you that in some ways it's not made easier by what Jesus tells us to do next.

"Consider the lilies of the field" and "Look at the birds in the air" (I feel like these would be said in a British accent!). Honestly, these just feel like escape tactics, don't they? When you're worried about your mortgage or a relationship or whether you'll get a job or not, just go to a happy place and think about birds and flowers. In many ways it just seems hard to imagine how this is going to help, how it really relates to helping us stop being a people of anxiety. What exactly is the connection?

As I was thinking about that this week I thought a bit more about spiritual disciplines, several of which we'll be talking about in this series. It's often hard to see how they will actually change us. While fasting might certainly change our

bodies, it's hard to see how it will change our spiritual lives. Meditating might give us peace for a few minutes, but how does it change the rest of our days? We are a people who like to see direct and quick results from what we do, so how do these things (or considering flowers or birds) do that? It seems like a strange way to tackle a problem.

And one of the ways that Richard Foster (a spiritual disciplines guru) describes these things is that they are like a farmer who plants a field. He tills the soil, he puts in the seed, he might water the land, but ultimately he can't make the seed grow or change. That, of course, is up to God. Or perhaps it's like someone who builds a sailboat. They can craft the boat, put it in the water and put the sail up (spiritual disciplines) but then they have to wait for the winds to blow through the sail before they can change their location. Or, as CS Lewis has said, "When we carry out our 'religious duties' (or spiritual disciplines) we are like people digging channels in a waterless land, in order that when at last the water comes, it may find them ready."

The point is that what we'll be talking about during this Lenten season are the practices that we can engage in which will help put us in a position through which God can really change us and shape us into the people who more and more reflect his image. That these actions, in and of themselves, don't change us (that's the work of the Spirit) and yet they are the part that we can play as we become the clay which God can shape for his purpose.

Which brings us back to our scripture passage this morning and the words of Jesus that speak to the fact that if we are a people who struggle with worry then we should consider the lilies and look at the ravens. As I said earlier, my initial response to this has been that it feels like simply trying to escape from the realities of our anxieties and yet the more I've thought about it, the more I've seen that actually this is not so much a tactic of trying to escape reality as much as a practice of becoming more aware of reality. As Tom Long has pointed out, these verbs, consider and look, are strong verbs meaning they are things we are to do with great intensity and intentionality.

I mean think about it. When we look at a beautiful cardinal we don't give him a pat on the back and say, "Wow, great job cardinal, way to make yourself beautiful." We don't give a rose a high five and say, "You've outdone yourself this time, Mr. Rose." We realize that the bird and the flower didn't *do* anything to become beautiful, rather it's simply what God has created them to be. They are gifts from God, and they are completely dependent upon God.

And when we, with intensity and intentionality, take the time to "smell the roses" so to speak, we are exercising our eyes in such a way that they begin to see life through the lens that what we see around us, whether it be flowers or birds or clothes or drink or food or our family or who we see in the mirror or the past or present or future are all gifts, all things which are dependent upon God and God alone. Ultimately, we are reminded that we are not in control. And one of the things I've

noticed in my own life is that a major part of the reason that I worry is because I feel like it gives me a certain amount of control. If I worry about it enough the money will come or the relationship will work out or the health fear will not come to pass.

But when we submerge ourselves into God's world more deeply, when we take the time to be more fully aware of God's gifts around us, then we will begin to more fully live into the reality that it is God who is in control. We will begin to remember more clearly how God has provided for us in the past, giving us hope in the present and the future. We begin to see that when we inhale God's presence, we exhale fear and anxiety.

And yet there is one thing, I believe, which really hinders our being able to do this. It is the simple fact that we are much too busy to really spend the time intentionally looking at lilies or birds or simply spending time focusing on the gifts of God that are around us. Amidst the hustle and bustle of our lives, running to and fro, hither and thither, doing this and that, going from work to play to church to home, there is little time to notice a flower or bird. And, of course, this is not limited to adults, is it? Watch this.

The point of watching this is not, of course, to say that these particular kids are doing too much, but it is to say that our busyness now affects all of us. We live incredibly complicated lives today. Children have more toys than they could ever play with. Youth, as you heard, are playing sports, doing band, attending church programs. Adults are spending long hours at work, chauffeuring kids to everything they're involved in, coming here for committees or projects to work on. Is it any wonder then that this week's Zionsville Times Sentinel advertised a workshop on our overscheduled kids or that adults feel like they're being torn in a thousand different directions.

So, what's the answer? Is it to do nothing? Not work, not study, not do sports or band, not be involved in church? No, the scriptures speak strongly against being slothful. It does, however, first of all mean that we view our work, our things, our relationships and our time through the lens of their being God's gift, which allows us to hold on to these things less tightly. And secondly, it means we have to be more aware that the society in which we live encourages you to do more, spend more, get involved in more, and I think that we in the church need to stand up against this. Again, not in a legalistic way that says you should never work more than 40 hours a week or play a sport on Sunday, but in a way that asks does the way I spend my money and time show that I am seeking God first?

In other words how can we live lives of simplicity? What does that even mean? Perhaps our youth can help us with this.

Now after I first heard this, I was going to say that the definition that most kids gave, which is that simplicity is simple or easy is quite clearly not true, because simplicity is anything but easy. In many ways that may be true. But then I was reminded of a

mission trip I took to Mexico where we helped lead a VBS. After we returned those of who had gone talked about how fascinating it was that the people there, who had so little, were so full of joy. That even though for VBS we basically just told stories and let them color and draw, they seemed so overjoyed almost without worries. That we have so much more and are doing so much more and they seem so much happier. And then what did we do? Before you know it we were back in our relatively large homes, back shopping at all of our stores, running to and fro from one activity to the next! And then we wonder why we're so anxious and so tired and why joy is hard to find.

Sisters and brothers, we have to slow down. We have to begin putting in our calendars, not just Johnny's baseball game or getting together with the girls or working out, but also considering the lilies and birds. Not in order to never do those other things, but so that we will begin seeing those things as gifts that we have received. But that will be a challenge. It might be easy for us today to say, "Great, let's do this," but as soon as we go home or start our workweek tomorrow we will easily forget our call to live lives of simplicity that says we don't need to fill all of our lives with things and all of our time with activities.

Which is why we need one another and it's why we want to try something out in the next few weeks. Now some of you are parts of small groups or 2nd half adventurers or other groups that meet during the week, but many of you are not. And so we wanted to figure out ways for us to connect during the week as we practice these disciplines like simplicity and the easiest way for us to do this is through things like blogs, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Now we realize that not everyone here engages in these things and that's okay, but we also know that many of you do. And so we want to encourage you to join with one another in the weeks ahead and talk about your experience in these disciplines.

So, this week when you leave you will be given a homework assignment that asks you to give something up or away that will simplify your life. For example, you might give up a particular activity this week that frees you to walk along or trail or to spend time with a neighbor or friend. Or you might give away a game or something else that takes up a lot of time so that you can focus more on God. As you do that we would invite you to share that experience on Facebook or Twitter or even take a picture of something which symbolized that experience for you. If you aren't into the internet, then feel free to call us at the church or write a note and give it to Lisa Price and we can put it up on our website. Our point is to try and join together as a church family in the Lenten season ahead and as a community practice our faith together. It's a fun experiment for us to engage in.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, we are called to remember that everything we have and are is a gift from God, because only then might we live without anxiety. But that will not just happen. No, it will take the intentionality of slowing down, of live more simply, of looking for the beauty of God. And it will take us encouraging and

challenging one another. In this week, let each one of us take this challenge and let us breathe in of God as one body. May it be so. Amen.