

What's Eating You? (Sermon on the Mount #13)

Matthew 6:25-34, Proverbs 3:5-8

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Some people call it “quote-mining” or “contextomy”. You may not be familiar with either of those terms, but I know you’ve seen this practice in action. I’m talking about the ways that we pick and choose what to repeat to others to make sure that our message, our presumptions, our prejudices come across in the best light possible.



For instance, when the film *Se7en* was released, *Entertainment Weekly* printed a pretty harsh review, noting that the best part of the entire move was the opening credits: “The credit sequence, with its jumpy frames and near-subliminal flashes of psychoparaphernalia, is a small masterpiece of dementia.” When they printed a movie poster, however, it read glowingly, “a small masterpiece!”

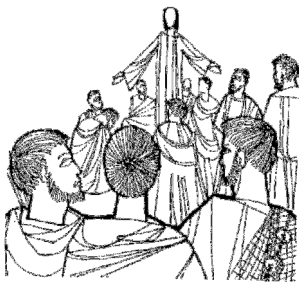
In 2013, the British daily paper called *The Guardian* ran an article about the wisdom of touring Sri Lanka. The author said, “Sri Lanka has the hotels, the food, the climate and the charm to offer the perfect holiday...It's just a pity about the increasingly despotic government.” Yet within hours, the official Sri Lankan news agency provided a highly-edited link to the article, proclaiming “Sri Lanka has everything to offer the perfect holiday”.¹

You might wonder why this matters today, here... It’s simple – people do this all the time in church. We find a little nugget that we like in the Bible, and then we memorize it and we repeat it and we sell it on t-shirts or inspirational posters. It doesn’t always work well, of course. Try quoting Hosea 1:2 at the next seminar for Christian singles: “Go and marry

¹ These and other instances of quote-mining can be found on Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fallacy_of_quoting_out_of_context#cite_note-7

a prostitute who will bear illegitimate children conceived through prostitution.” Without the proper context, this verse is at least misleading if not dangerous.

Similarly, how many times have you heard someone quote Philippians 4:13: “I can do all things through Him who gives me strength”? So often we take that to mean that you can literally *do* anything: run a marathon, win the Super Bowl, solve a Rubik’s Cube... because Christ will give you the strength to do whatever you want. Of course, when Paul wrote that sentence, he was talking about his own imprisonment and difficulties, and what he really meant was that he could *get through* or *endure* anything in the knowledge that Christ was with him. Context matters.



I say all of this because we return to the Sermon on the Mount today, not having been here since January. And the reading that you’ve just heard represents some of the most beloved, most familiar language in the entire Bible. You’ve seen these words on greeting cards, on wall décor at the Christian bookstore, and in a thousand memes that come across social media.

And very few, if any, of these instances include the first word of the reading: “Therefore” (in Greek, *dia touto*). When someone says “therefore”, it is incumbent on us to read what has come before – that provides necessary context and information. “*Since all of this is true, then...*” So before we get to the birds of the air and the flowers of the field we need to remember what Jesus has already said.

Throughout the message, Jesus has indicated repeatedly that the life of a disciple is difficult because we engage the world on different terms than do those who are not followers. More specifically, he has just finished a statement about accumulating wealth and the dangers that arise when we build our lives around the service and worship

of Mammon rather than God. He says that if we want to serve Mammon, or wealth, we can do so – but in seeking to orient our lives that way we will invariably be saying “no” to the life of faithfulness that he expects from his followers.

Having said all of that, then, he says “Therefore... If you want to serve God, and if you want to de-throne Mammon from your life, you can start by letting go of worry.” Worry, Jesus says, can get in the way of faithful service to God and neighbor, and has no place in the Christian life.

Which sounds good in theory, but the truth is very few people will confess to enjoying worry; most of us wish we had fewer worries; and when someone tells us “Hey, don’t worry”, that’s about as helpful as having a friend tell you to “Cheer up” or “don’t be mad”. “Don’t worry about tomorrow.” As my niece reminded me this morning, “Never in the history of calming down has anyone ever calmed down by being told to calm down.” Thanks, Jesus. Short of putting Xanax in the drinking water, how are we going to do this?

Fortunately, Jesus has a concrete suggestion or two. “Look at the birds”, he says. “Consider the lilies”.

And we think now that maybe Jesus is guilty of a little decontextualization. Consider the birds? Are you crazy, Jesus? Didn’t you see that news story about die-offs that are occurring these days? Last week, dozens of starlings were found dead in Fairfax County, VA. Before that, villagers in Bangladesh found 5000 dead robins, mynahs, kingfishers, and nightingales in the wake of a storm; last month they were picking dead Northern Gannets off the shores of Florida. If you want us not to worry, I’m not so sure that this is a great example, Jesus...

Relax. Jesus’ point is not that every bird lives an idyllic existence and dies happy of old age. His point is that it is not in the nature of birds to define themselves by their ability

to acquire or store material objects. Birds and flowers and other living things are, Jesus said, dependent upon that which is beyond them to satisfy their daily needs and engage in any kind of meaning and purpose.

So when Jesus says, “Look at the birds!” or “Look at the flowers!”, what he’s doing is advocating the spiritual practice of *wonder*, which almost always, in my experience, leads to the fruits of appreciation and joy – the opposite of worry.

In a world that is obsessed with efficiency and productivity and acquisitiveness and making sure that *I* have *mine*, disciples are called to live with the freedom that says that it is not up to us. We are not the first movers, the prime actors, or the ultimately responsible parties. We are followers. We are servants. We are companions. We learn this as we engage in the joy of exploring and wondering – by simply looking at that which surrounds us and seeking to be filled with awe as we contemplate its existence and joy as we see where it leads.

If you know much about me, you know that I have found the ability to engage in the discipline of wonder through immersing myself in the natural world. When I am able to slow down and remember that I am surrounded by a creation that is not mine to control, I am able to be grateful for that gift and to the One who is the Author of such a creation.

A friend passed along a little book entitled *How to Be a (Bad) Birdwatcher*, and the British author captures my sense of wonder and awe well in this description of his encounter

with a drab little bird in his backyard. Listen:



...I came in from a hard January frost and a feeble winter sun. The sun didn't do much for me, but it stirred the soul of a dunnock. A dunnock is perhaps the drabest bird in Britain... a dunnish,

brownish, smallish, skulking little thing... And he,

ignoring the cold, was filled with a sudden excitement about the coming of the warmer weather. In that iron frost, he felt the tug of spring; and he sang his heart out as a result. It's not a great song, compared with that nightingale on Walberswick marshes. It's not a special bird, in terms of peak experiences; I'd come in telling everybody about my hobby, but I wouldn't take up anybody's time with a dunnock moment.

But there he was against the cold blue sky, every feather picked out by the low winter sun as he sang his song of spring and gave it absolutely everything. It was a song that made the whole day better. A common bird; a rare moment.²

Do you see? I think that's what Jesus meant when he said "Consider the birds" – look for ways to be engaged with the world that point you to wonder and awe.

As I've said, for me, that means taking a walk or working in the garden. Maybe that helps you wonder, too. If not, here are a few other ideas:



- plant a seed, preferably with the assistance of a child. Watch. Wait. Repeat.
- turn off the talk radio and the 24 hour news channels, which are entire industries built on instilling worry and anxiety in people like us.
- try your hand at baking a loaf of bread
- take some photos – or just look at some
- the next cobweb you find – look at it carefully. Consider how intricate, how frail, how temporary – how wonderful - it is.

² From *How to Be a (Bad) Birdwatcher*, Simon Barnes (Pantheon, 2005). I don't have a page number because my copy has gone missing; this quote was found here: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1176663883>

- if you have access to a pregnant friend, look at her belly. Touch it. Marvel at the gift of life (warning: make sure that this person is a) a really good friend and b) has given you permission. If you don't, it's really, really creepy.)

In short, stop to consider all of the breathtakingly amazing stuff that happens every single day for which you have absolutely ZERO responsibility and over which you have no control.

You may recall that math and science are not the things at which I'm best. In fact, most of my teachers spent a great deal of time suggesting that I major in English or Social Studies of some sort. And yet the single best lecture I've ever heard was in my required biology course at Geneva College, where Dr. Calvin Freeman spoke for three hours on the topic of "The Renal Cell Structure as it Reflects the Glory of God." In that talk, Dr. Freeman spent two afternoons describing for us in painstaking detail the ways that the cells in our kidneys were structured and how they functioned. His point was that if we never had the book of Genesis, if we never read a word of the Creation, even then we could ascertain the power and majesty of the Creator simply by

looking at and learning from the Creation. Dr. Freeman taught me about wonder, and I've always been grateful for that.



³When we wonder, we are more free to be involved in and interested in this thing that is greater than we are; when we consider that for which we are not responsible, we are better equipped to do what we can to participate in the world that is bigger than we are. As we discover the work, the care, the beauty of the source of all life, we are increasingly free to

³ *Christ in the Wilderness: Consider the Lilies*, Stanley Spencer, 1939

seek God's kingdom and God's righteousness – two other things that are not ours to manipulate or purchase.

Consider the birds... Look at the lilies... In admiring and appreciating that which is not ours to control, command, produce, or achieve – it becomes easier to use what we do have and who we are becoming in ways that are congruent with God's purposes for us, our neighbor, and the world.

You'll see a lot in the next few days, I suspect, about "Earth Day." You'll hear about the weather. You'll probably rejoice in or complain about it. The pollen will have you sneezing or itching. The birds are on the move. Notice this, people of God. Notice it. And give thanks. And live like it matters, not just to you, but to your neighbor and to the One who gave it to us, and the One who takes great delight in it and in you. Thanks be to God. Amen.