

Greetings everybody. Bryce, Luke, Anna and I spent the last week at camp Camrec being the pastors for the junior high/senior high week. Excluding our family, we had a total of 12 campers and 13 staff and volunteers and one dog. Our theme for the summer was “because Jesus” and we talked about “because Jesus, we are loved for who we are and what we are, we are conduits of Jesus love, we are brave, we can help, because Jesus tomorrow matters and because Jesus we are sent out with love. Bryce and I found the sessions to be meaningful and practical and the campers engaging as they joyfully participated in the Bible time – as well as in every other activity. Leah, Zane and Paula represented well 😊.

When I first went up to Camrec I couldn't really imagine how the camp would or could be so special to the community. I mean, I, being from large Mennonite Centres in comparison to Washington State – was used to expansive lawns, swimming lakes, luxurious plumbed cabins, a huge kitchen, a tuck shop...having everything you need – right at your fingertips. My friends, you have a convert.

Standing at morning watch – looking out at Big Jim in the background behind the cross – looking around at my sisters and brothers who are just learning right now how deep and powerful God's love is for them – and praying that a portion of this epiphany will stay with them to sustain them this year – with all its trials and temptations and joys and worries.

This week I kept wondering whether this is how everyone felt on that mountainside so long ago when Jesus brought all his campers together and set them down and faced them and spoke this life-changing words. Would the words he says stick with them? Or would they be distracted by the views, the other campers, the bugs, their wounds, their own worries of what life would be like when they got home?

Let's review what we know so far about the lessons Jesus taught on that mountain.

1. We start with the beatitudes. Jesus blesses those that have been oppressed by others, by the government and by their neighbors – thus setting the tone for the rest of the sermon. Jesus blesses the poor, the weak, those who long for justice, those who work for peace, and those who long for righteousness.
2. After this, Jesus begins his discussion on how we should live as members of the Kingdom of God. He compares God's children to salt and light – challenging us to be tasty and bright – not taste-less and dull.
3. Jesus then debunks some false teachings about the laws God gave to God's people. Jesus reminds God's people that God desires for us to treat each other with respect – with the same kind of love that we would give to our children. Jesus reminds people that promises are binding – and we should take responsibility for what we will say that we will do. And Jesus reminds the people that God desires wholeness – and that wholeness requires work. Jesus encourages the people to be sneaky in the face of injustice – to break the cycle – to work for peace not just for themselves, but for the world.
4. After Jesus transforms the meaning of the laws, he jumps right into piety and right worship. Jesus reminds the people that whatever we do in public ought to match what we do in private. Jesus teaches the people how to pray and worship – with full integrity.

Thus, it seems that we have come full circle – we have been reminded about integrity and genuine living and worshipping - by practicing what we preach.

Yet...up until now there has been little talk about emotion. Although Jesus did discuss anger – as an emotion that stems from our sense of justice and spurs us to action.

If you're one of the pious listening in on that mountainside, you may agree with everything that Jesus has been saying...and you're starting to think that life here on the mountain camp listening to Jesus is really really good.

But then Jesus delivers a whammy of a lesson – one that addresses our inner-most dark and dangerous feelings that everyone likes to keep hidden – our little secret indulgences: feelings of greed and entitlement.

We'd like to keep them hidden because they have no place in the Kingdom of God – they do not smack of integrity – but when we feel the emotions of greed and entitlement, we can easily find ourselves sitting dangerously close to the edge of the precipice of injustice.

And so, in the mountains we hear Jesus telling us: Matthew 6:19-34

¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

²²“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; ²³ but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

²⁴“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

²⁵“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? ²⁶ 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?

²⁷ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸ And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰ 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—you of little faith?

³¹ Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ ³² For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

³⁴“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

So what is Jesus possibly saying to us through this passage? I think that this passage is both challenging and assuring. Reminding the people that were listening that life in the Kingdom of God cannot be divided between what we want and what God wants.

Jesus speaks of not being able to serve both God and wealth. Bryce read from Deuteronomy today – a primary passage for those who are in the school of Prosperity Theology. Those who follow this type of theology believe that if we do God’s will and have true strong faith or pray hard enough then we will abound with God’s blessing. If we do not do God’s will and / or have a weak faith, then everything will be taken from us.

This kind of theology does not address when bad things happen to good people – and when good things happen to bad people. This kind of theology makes assumptions about a person’s faith based on the amount of material blessings they have received; a theology already present and vibrant in Jesus’ time.

Jesus debunks this theology when he very specifically addresses the crowd to make for themselves storehouses in heaven. The phrase “treasure in heaven” would have been a familiar phrase for Jesus’ Jewish audience. They would have understood from the teachers of the law that treasure in heaven meant keeping the law and giving alms. We would, similarly interpret “treasure in heaven” to mean love, peace, and righteousness.

We cannot serve both wealth and God. This love and obsession with wealth is incompatible with Kingdom theology.

But then thoughts niggle through my mind... “But what will happen to me if I stop worrying about money? Where will we get food? We need money to eat, don’t we? And to pay our bills, and to buy clothes when ours get worn out ...what about our children? They need money too for clothing and food and education and social activities. And what about our vacation – it’s been almost 3 years since I’ve seen my sister and nieces. Money doesn’t grow on trees. Can’t I still serve God and like money? I don’t have to love it. GEEPERS”

After the discussion on wealth Jesus says, “Do not worry about anything...about your life, about what you will eat, about what you will wear. Here worry can also be translated to say “strive for”...Do not strive for what you will eat...what you will wear.... Don’t let your anxiety over these things lead you to preoccupation with them.

To this, Jesus answers, “Look at, Consider...” “Look at these birds – look at how your heavenly father cares for them – you are so much more valuable to God than they. What good is it to worry about seeds and feathers – will worrying about it add to the span of your life? “Consider these flowers – these weeds – this thistle that is choking out my lilies – Consider these – really look.

Have you ever really looked at a flower – regardless of whether it is a weed or cultured – the petals are so intricate – the colours so vibrant – no seamstress could ever sew such a beautiful garment? And with so little effort, this thistle grows and blossoms – and bees come and drink from her, and then we just chop it up with our weed-eater. If God so clothes these thistles – this grass in the field – with a splendour that exceeds that of Solomon – Don’t you think that God will also take care of you?

So why are you worried about letting go?

If we are always preoccupied with our necessity, then we act like those who are outside of the kingdom of God. However, if we strive first for God's kingdom – and we know what that looks like – then we can begin to trust jubilee – sabbath – that God will provide for us and we can let go of our worry and our striving for more food and better clothing – for wealth and acclaim.

Back in 2009 I and one of the youth from my church in Saskatchewan travelled to Paraguay to attend Mennonite World Conference. Paraguay is a country where there are more poor than wealthy – where, according to our standards, even the wealthy are middle class.

I can't stop thinking about how cold I was and how I longed for a long hot shower in a warm bathroom in a warm building with a warm bed to follow. I can't stop remembering how easily I was upset by the substandard sleeping accommodations. I can't get out of my mind the little barefoot children following us around in the middle of a 7 degrees C. rainstorm. (Fahrenheit?) I can't get out of my mind the shelter we took under the patchy roof of a house built of 1x6's with a 3 inch gap between the boards.

I learned many interesting and not so lovely things about myself when in Paraguay...and that was, perhaps, the best education in my life so far.

Would my interpretation of today's lesson of the Sermon on the Mount be useful to the people in Paraguay if I preached it in the slums? If I preached to them Jesus' words on the mountain "Do not worry about your clothes, do not worry about what you will eat – where you will sleep – do not worry about your body?" I dare not use this same interpretation when preaching this sermon to those whom we met in Paraguay.

But Jesus spoke these words to everybody...and all who heard the words were challenged by them.

Those from the developing nations that we met at Mennonite World Conference told us of how God had been there for them. How the Good News of God's Kingdom through Jesus Christ was building the church exponentially – how people embraced the call to seek first/strive first for God's kingdom – knowing full well that God would provide the comfort, strength, support, justice, even food and shelter that they needed to make it through the day.

What is our worry? Will my obsession with "things" add a single day to my life? What would it mean for me to let go of my love of money?

We know through scriptures – through Jesus' words to us that neither wealth nor poverty is God's will. Jesus asks the people then and asks us now...what comes first in your lives – is it wealth and accumulation of things – or is it seeking first the kingdom of God? Why am I worried about clothing? Why am I worried about food? Are there not more important things to worry about? I want to always trust that God will provide – and I want to always be one who is God's hands and feet – providing for others when they are in want.

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, in 1948 depicted these questions of priority in the following parables.

"When the prosperous man on a dark but starlit night drives comfortably in his carriage and has the lanterns lighted, aye, then he is safe, he fears no difficulty, he carries his light with him and it is not dark close around him;

but precisely because he has the lanterns lighted, and has a strong light close to him, precisely for this reason he cannot see the stars, for his lights obscure the stars, which the poor peasant driving without the lights can see gloriously in the dark but starry night.

So those deceived ones live in the temporal existence: either, occupied with the necessities of life, they are too busy to avail themselves of the view, or in the prosperity and good days they have—as it were lanterns lighted and close about them—everything is so satisfactory, so pleasant, so comfortable, but the view is lacking, the prospect, the view of the stars."¹

The “view of the stars” is, of course, a vision of God’s kingdom that which Jesus calls us to seek first and always.

What does it mean to seek the kingdom first?

As a starting point, Kierkegaard suggests that we need to learn from the silence before God that the birds and the lilies exemplify so well.

He says that “in keeping inner silence – the silence of the birds and the lilies, we can forget our name – our own name, the renowned name, the pitiful name, the insignificant name for the sake of praying in silence to God, “Hallowed be THY name!”

In silence we forget ourselves – our plans, the great, the all-comprehensive plans, or the petty plans regarding our lives and our future for the sake of praying in silence to God “THY Kingdom come!”

That we in silence may forget our will, our self-will, for the sake of praying in silence to God, “Thy will be done.”²

Friends, Christ on the mountain calls us to come and look and see and hear – God will care for all our needs because we are beloved by God. And because others are also beloved of God we will provide for the needs when there is want. We are all beloved for who we are, not what we own or what was given to us or our status or what our parents and grandparents built. We are beloved. We seek first the kingdom of God – and God will provide.

¹ Greg Cootsona, “THE BLOG Fresh Insights from Kierkegaard on Technology,” HuffPost (HuffPost, April 21, 2017), https://www.huffpost.com/entry/fresh-insights-from-kierk_b_9729470.

² Katharine Rose, “Worry, Not: Søren Kierkegaard on What We Can Learn from the Birds of the Air and Lilies of the Field,” Inward Turn (Inward Turn, January 5, 2021), <https://theinwardturn.com/worry-not-soren-kierkegaard-on-what-we-can-learn-from-the-birds-of-the-air-and-lilies-of-the-field/>.