

CONSIDER THE LILIES

(05/03/2020)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 12:13-34

“Jesus 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.’” (Luke 12:22-23)

Today is the third Sunday after Easter (or the fourth Sunday of the Easter season). It is also the eighth Sunday that we have not been able to meet for Sunday morning worship as the gathered church.

Today, the first Sunday of the month, would have been communion Sunday. We would have joined together in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. This is always a special service in the life of our little church, much the same as our Maundy Thursday and Christmas Eve services.

I have learned something about myself during the current restrictions on public gatherings. I have always thought of myself as a low church worship leader—more casual than formal. However, I have recently heard of pastors who serve communion to their parishioners in the church parking lot. The pastor remains in his/her pickup truck, and the parishioners drive by and receive the consecrated host (and perhaps even the cup) through their open car window. I have also read or heard of holding a “virtual” communion service with parishioners in their homes, with the communicants partaking of coffee and a donut.

I have discovered that I am not a big fan of this kind of sacramental observance. I am in no way casting aspersions on pastors who hold virtual worship services, for some are doing this meaningfully and creatively with their congregations, but I have come to realize that the setting in our sanctuary, the communion service, gathering around the table and serving each other are important parts of the experience—for me. I’m not saying that Jesus would disapprove of utilizing coffee and a donut; knowing him, he probably wouldn’t. All I’m saying is that it just isn’t the same—for me. I guess I am more of a high church liturgist than I realized!

Recently, I have been walking our dog, Brie, for forty-five minutes every morning except when it is raining (or when I don’t feel like it). During these walks, I have become conscious of the springtime flowers as they unfold: the forsythia, the azaleas, the magnolias, the daffodils, and now the blossoming of the tulips. The lilies have yet to bloom, at least here in New England.

The coming unfolding of the lilies reminds me of how beautiful our sanctuary is on Easter Sunday—with tulips and lilies framing the altar. This is one of the things I miss about not being able to gather in worship. So, this morning, let’s think about Jesus’ metaphorical use of the lily

in his teaching about an important lesson in life, a lesson that we hopefully internalize as we move through the life to which we are led by the pandemic's attendant restrictions.

In his use of the lily as a metaphor, Jesus' teaching is similar to the teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama) who, in his "Flower Sermon," held up a single flower before the gathering. According to legend, the flower was a lotus, not a lily, but I believe the point is the same. From the briefest traces of a smile, one of his disciples, Mahakasyapa, revealed that he understood the message of the sermon. Through this direct transmission of *prajna* (wisdom, the experience of Enlightenment), Mahakasyapa became the first of the Patriarchs, the disciples who took over the Buddha's teaching after he died.

Don't worry; since we are not gathered together in church this morning, I'm not going to hold up a flower and make you feel stupid if you don't get the deep hidden mystical meaning of the symbol. In Protestant sermons, as we know, the preacher usually ends up telling you what each and every symbol means, or at least what he or she thinks it means, two or three times by the end of the sermon!

Jesus, like the Buddha five hundred years before him, used metaphors as a teaching device. This teaching device is linked closely to Jesus' use of parables, little mythical stories that encourage us to identify with one or more of the characters. In letting our imagination play with the metaphor or parable, we learn something about ourselves, about life, and about the Kingdom of God.

The parables and metaphors are an important part of our scriptural heritage, for they are more indisputably tied to the historical Jesus than are many of other biblical texts, including the synoptic gospels. By the time the gospels were written, near the end of the first century, they reflected the traditions of the churches from which they arose more than they presented an accurate description of what Jesus did or said. A good deal of the material in the New Testament addressed problems in the churches or heretical points of view that emerged in the later years of the first century. In the course of taking a stand against these heresies, the early church fathers presented evidence which may or may not have been historically accurate. The gospel of Matthew provides an example of this in its attempt to prove that Jesus was the messiah whom the Jews had been seeking, for Matthew was trying to convert the Jews to Christianity. It is questionable whether Jesus thought of himself as the messiah and whether he was even interested in many parts of what later came to be called his teaching.

So, in the New Testament, we have the life and the teachings of Jesus interwoven with the life and the teachings of the early church. As we have discovered in our Sunday morning Bible study (before it was interrupted by the pandemic restrictions), some biblical scholars believe we actually know little about the life and teachings of Jesus, for all we have is the writings and the theology of the early church. Others believe that much of what Jesus said and did is probably accurately presented in scripture. Interestingly, almost no one argues about the parables. The parables and the metaphors are of special importance, for they alone are accepted as authentic teachings of Jesus, preserved by those who were with him and heard him.

Jesus presented his followers with metaphors and parables to shape their understanding of the Kingdom of God. The way to listen to a parable is to move into it with our imagination, to try it on for size and see how it fits. Parables and metaphors can only take us so far, for in the last analysis they are still analogies, but they can perform a useful function in shining a light on one some aspect of the Kingdom of God, one part of what it means to be a disciple of the Way.

In addition to the limitations of parables and symbols, it seems that in many of Jesus' teachings there is both a disclosure and a hiddenness, a revelation and a portion of the revelation that Jesus intentionally leaves shrouded in mystery. It's easy to see how some members of the early church believed there was a core of secret teachings that Jesus had transmitted to a select few. There is evidence for this gnostic position in passages like Luke 8 where Jesus tells the Parable of the Sower and the Seed to the crowd, but then explains its meaning privately to his disciples. Jesus tells his disciples that he speaks to the crowd in parables

*that they may see but not perceive,
listen but not understand.*

It would be nice if, some day, a biblical archaeologist could uncover a collection of writings by the disciples that explained some of Jesus' teachings that we in the crowd still find confusing!

What is the message of the metaphor of the lilies? What, in particular, are we supposed to do with Jesus' saying,

And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be of anxious mind. Instead, seek his kingdom and these things will be yours as well.

The King James translation says,

Seek not what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, neither be of doubtful mind.

The New English Bible translates the passage as,

And so, you are not to set your mind on food or drink; you are not to worry.

The Jerusalem Bible translates the passage as

But you, you must not set your hearts on things to eat and things to drink, nor must you worry.

How are we to understand what Jesus says about worry, anxiety, doubt, and about the things we seek or upon which we set our hearts, the things that distract us from directing our attention and efforts toward the Kingdom of God?

Do you ever wonder what God worries about? What are God's concerns? For example, is God concerned about our standard of living? I am tempted to say no, but then I think of the 1.5 billion people in our world who are living in abject poverty, and I think maybe God does care. Is God concerned about how successful we are with our lives, about our occupational or social status? It is inconceivable that God doesn't care about all those whose lives have been devastated by the economic impact of this pandemic. Do you think God cares whether we are happy or not? These parts of life are important to us, but we are taking a big step when we think that if God cares about us, then God must care about everything that we care about.

In examining the scriptures of our own religious tradition and the other major religious traditions of the world, we find that the parts of life that we set our minds on, about which we worry, may not be that important to God. Jesus tells us that God views life and views our life from a different perspective, from the perspective of eternity. Jesus encourages us to see ourselves as God sees us, to take this same sort of view.

During the forced retreat attendant to this pandemic, take a little time to self-reflect, to look at yourself and your life. What are the goals upon which you have set your heart? Why are these goals so important to you? How much of your energy, your physical, emotional, and psychic energy is being directed toward these ends? As a consequence, what parts of life are you neglecting? What is the price that you and your loved ones pay for this neglect?

In your moments of reflection, think about your daily and weekly concerns. What gets inside you, gnaws away at your insides and interrupts your sleep? Are you worried about the future, about your health, about your finances? Are you worried that you don't have enough control over your life? Do you have a difficult decision that you are called upon to make?

Jesus knows that we worry, that we are anxious. He tells us to trust. Jesus tells us that if we keep our priorities straight, if we set our sights on the Kingdom of God, the rest of our life will fall into place, though it may not be as we would have set it up if we were God. If we set our sights on our relationship with God, then we will bring an attitude of openness and trust to the

worrisome areas of our life. If we center our thinking on the worrisome things of life, we will not only fail to solve them, we will lose our contact with God in the process.

Over the past few weeks, three of our elderly parishioners have died (at least two from complications of the coronavirus). When I think of Gil, Don, and Rae, I think of the question Jesus asks: “Which of you by being anxious can add an extra day to your life?” Quite the contrary; we now know that by being anxious we can subtract several days, several years, even several decades from our lives. Jesus tells us it is the quality of the moments that are entrusted to us that is important, not the number of activities that we crowd into our day. And yet, speaking for myself, it seems our lives are so filled that there is no room for those parts of life which are most important--our family and our church.

Jesus continually calls us to a shakedown in our values and our priorities. He confronts us with the question of what God we worship, what we have placed in the center of our life. He confronts us with the question of what we value, what we hold dear. In this particular parable, Jesus asks us to look at our anxieties and our worries, what we find troubling, what it is we seek, for whatever we treasure, that will possess our heart.

The lily is so beautiful, so intricate, so mysterious. It disappears from time to time, especially in the winter, but it emerges from the ground every spring. It is a wonderful symbol of Easter! It certainly is beautifully clothed. It is a symbol of a life lived close to God, a natural and simple life. It is fulfilling the goal of self-actualization for which it was created. It is a powerful symbol of the peace that can come to us if we trust in God and in God’s power over the unfolding of our life.

In your moments of reflection in the coming week, as you examine your values and priorities, and especially those areas of your life which are worrisome, I invite you to consider the message of the lilies.

A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson

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