

Learning from the Lily

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The Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 19, 2009

Psalm 119:59-64; Philippians 4:4-9; Matthew 6:25-34

Text: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin. . . . Therefore do not worry. . . ." -- Matthew 6:28, 31

A friend of mine was once invited to preach at the baccaulaureate service at a posh girls' school in Manhattan, and he chose for his text this morning's gospel reading from Matthew: "Consider the lilies of the field," and so on. He thought, quite reasonably, that a school full of overachieving, hard-driven, type-A personalities and their parents and teachers would be just the sort of people who need to hear Jesus' message to relax, to calm down, to stop worrying, to stop and smell the roses or at least consider the lilies.

And so my friend preached, probably rather well as he's a good preacher, and after the service, as he was receiving the customary thanks and congratulations for a job well done and a message much needed, the father of one of the girls came up to him, took him by the hand in a not entirely cordial handshake, fixed him with a look that made it clear where the money and power were, and said to him, more or less, "Reverend, that sermon was nonsense. My daughter didn't get into this school by considering the lilies of the field. She got in here through her own hard work and the best efforts of her mother and me, and that's how she succeeded in here and that's how she'll succeed out there. Those who fritter away their lives by considering the lilies of the field are going to be left with the lilies in the field. Thank you for your sermon." I think that was the last time my friend preached at that particular school.

Jesus' words about the lilies, and, more to the point, he words about not worrying, strike some people as nonsense. We think we get through life by worrying about things. But when I finished reading these same words last week, I could hear a gentle hubbub move through the pews and I knew that my timing was off. I'd prepared a sermon on the integrity of creation and you wanted a sermon on worry, and a more gifted preacher – or at least a more daring one – might've scrapped the prepared sermon and preached off the cuff about worry, but I chose to give the topic a bit more thought and return with the sermon you wanted last week. This is that sermon.

Worry. The malady that afflicts all of us from time to time and some of us chronically. And those of us in the church may be particularly susceptible to it because of our sensitivity to the world's troubles – our own and everyone else's.

A friend says that if a Martian showed up on Sunday mornings and made the rounds of most of our churches to find out what the defining characteristic of Christian humans is, he or she or it would probably conclude that it's anxiety, because if you listen to what is talked about and the way it's talked about in most of our churches, you'd conclude that we Christians seem to be an anxious bunch; we appear to be anxious about everything.

It comes out in sermons about injustice and despair. It comes out in prayers for the sick and the poor. It comes out in readings about sin and judgment. Without using the word very often, we churchgoers seem to be an anxious lot. We seem to worry a great deal about peace in the Middle East, poverty in Africa, malfeasance in Manhattan, and catfish in the Cuyahoga. We are constantly asking God to fix things are at the very

least to help us fix things. Give someone a job. Arrest someone else's cancer. Be with someone else's loved one. Bring someone else home safely. Get a dear one through the latest bout of illness or trouble.

And there's nothing wrong with being concerned for the welfare of the world. If we're going to ask God for anything, there's nothing wrong with asking God on behalf of others. That's one of the distinguishing marks of a Christian, in fact: we think about and pray about and are concerned about others.

But worry is something different. Worry is an emotional and mental state that has gone beyond the realm of legitimate and noble concern and has entered the realm of unprofitable waste, and that's really all worry is: wasted concern.

Now some of you may be offended to think that your concern for your child or spouse or anything else could be wasted, but in fact it can be and it often is. Concern which is purposeful – that is, which leads to useful action – is good concern. If you're concerned about your teenager's safety behind the wheel, for instance, you teach them how to drive. You don't leave it to the driving instructor and hope for the best; you practice with your teenager over and over in the empty parking lot we sold to the mall thirty years ago until you're satisfied that your child knows how to handle a vehicle responsibly. And then you talk with your child about their friends and you ask your child's friends to take you and your child for a drive so you can see how they handle a vehicle and how they behave with each other inside a vehicle. And you talk to your child's friends' parents. And when you've done all of that, and if you're satisfied that your child is ready to drive, then you stop worrying. You've done all you can to make her safe or as safe as anyone can make her, and you let her go.

That's the first thing I take from Jesus' words about worry: worry is about waste, and waste doesn't contribute anything to anything.

The second thing I take from Jesus' words about those lilies is that even something as dumb as a flower knows its place in God's creation. Do you? Do you know your place in God's world, and do you keep it constantly in mind?

We come again to that Christian tendency toward hyper-conscientiousness, that tendency to think that every injustice, every instance of suffering, every despairing soul is our concern.

Actually, they're not. They're God's concern. A few chapters further on in Matthew's gospel, we would have heard Jesus remind his followers not to be afraid, for "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father" (10:29). If God knows the tumbling of a sparrow, then God certainly knows the needs of those ground down by poverty, terrorized and dehumanized by violence, or enslaved to addiction. God knows their needs even when we don't, and God has ways of meeting those needs we will never know. God doesn't need our help for everything; God needs our help for those things we can do something about. And part of our job as Christians is to love God with all our minds, which means that we are to discern as best we can between those things we can do something about and those things we can't. We would all do well to carry in our wallets or purses or better yet in our minds that prayer for serenity attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Serenity comes from knowing one's place in God's world and know that there are others, in other places that are not ours, who are also God's faithful servants, laboring in God's vineyard, and worry comes about when we lose that clarity.

Many years ago, I was a chaplain in a large trauma hospital in Houston, and one of my jobs was to help clear out the period traffic jams that filled up the hospital's hallways and waiting areas. Specifically, I was to remind the families of patients that there was nothing they could do for their loved one by sitting in a waiting room consumed with worry. Once the paramedics and doctors and nurses and technicians had

done their job, in the vast majority of cases there was nothing to do but let the healing process run its course, and families could do that better at home than they could at the hospital. I know a lot of us feel disloyal if we go home to rest or take care of the dog or even distract ourselves with TV or dinner with friends, but it's important to remember that being a good steward of God's resources means being there when a person needs our presence and not wasting that resource when they don't.

So that's the second thing about worry that I take from Jesus' words about the lily and worry. Worry is first about waste; second, it's about place; and third, it's about grace, specifically, God's grace.

That father who told my friend at the girls' school what he thought about his sermon could have been speaking for a lot of people, especially a lot of Americans. We are a can-do nation – a country of adventurers, explorers, entrepreneurs, risk-takers, inventors and innovators – and the heart of our cultural myth is less about freedom and more about success. We believe we are self-made people and a self-made nation. God may have brought the Pilgrims safely to these shores, but we believe the Pilgrims did the rest, and we've been doing the same for nearly four hundred years.

We cleared the land, we planted the crops, we built the houses, we dug the wells, we raised the factories, we developed the resources, we produced the wealth. This is our country because we made it, and we made it great. That's the American myth. We're here because we got ourselves here and have kept ourselves here. To paraphrase William Henley, we are the masters of our fate, we are the captains of our soul.

There is an element of truth in that myth, as there is in every myth, but there is more truth in the acknowledgment of God's grace. We are here not because of our own efforts, worthy though those efforts may be, but because God allowed those efforts to succeed. It is God's will that is sovereign, not ours, and it is our job to discern that will, as best we can, rather than pretend that God's will doesn't exist – which is the way most people live – or worse yet, deceive ourselves into thinking that whatever we want, God also wants, which is the besetting sin of religious people. As Lincoln is said to have replied to the minister who who prayed that God was on the side of the Union in the Civil War, “Sir, let us pray not that God is on our side, but that we are on God's side.”

The lily does not plant itself, water itself, or cause the sun to shine for its benefit; there is no such thing as a self-made lily. God makes the lily, through grace, just as God makes all of us. That's grace. And that's the third thing, and perhaps the most important thing, I take from the lesson of the lily and Jesus' words about worry. When all is said and done, it's all about grace.

So those are the three lessons I take from Jesus' words about worry. Worry is first about waste; it's second about place; and third, it's about grace. You may want to write those down; they may prove useful someday.

People who “get it,” who “get” the Christian gospel, “get” grace. They know it to be operating in their own lives and they are drawn to its operation in the lives of others. And not just in the lives of people, but also in the life of God's entire creation. We are not our own; we belong to God, and for people who really, truly, honestly, and sincerely believe that – not just think it, but believe it with trust – the only possible response is gratitude and praise.

That's why Paul urged the Philippians to rejoice in the Lord always. Not at 9:30 or 10:30 on Sunday mornings, not during your quiet time or Bible study, not on your morning walks, but always. In the bad times as well as the good, in the fearful times as well as the secure, when things are going wrong as well as when they're going right. Recognize the grace that has brought you and everything else, including the lily, to this day, and I can promise you, you will rejoice in the Lord. Always.

Let us pray. Thou hast made us for thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee. Amen.