

St. Andrew's UMC
May 25th, 2008
Matthew 6:24-34
"The Gentile Thing"

I have heard that a low minor league baseball player in Texas was traded for 10 maple bats, each costing \$69, discounted to \$65.50 each, for 6 to 11 bats. The man responded, "I don't really care," he said Friday. "It'll make a better story if I make it to the big leagues."

I don't know about that. If I were he, I would be worried—very much, about my self-esteem and the future of my career. I do not know if it was the thick skin or the robust sense of healthy ego that led him to say that.

I have a question: which is more effective in fighting against anxiety attacks and depression: Zoloft or the words of Jesus in the scriptures? How many have experienced a relief from anxiety, because they have read this above passage, as opposed to having taken the pill?

We do worry about our own lives, both present and future, about the present economy and the retirement. If we do not, most of us are convinced, that we would end up in a disaster.

Would you take Zoloft, so you would not worry, if your investment lost value, on which your income, welfare, and retirement depend? Or, would you rather turn to the above passage of the Bible, if the company in whose stocks you have heavily invested posted significant losses two quarters in a row?

Jesus says do not be anxious about life:

"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?"

What would it have sounded like to the hearers in Jesus' time? The crowd gathered around him was not the wealthy or the upper class. Chances are that it was probably the poor, working class. How would they have taken what Jesus had to say to them?

In the passage, it appears that Jesus was talking about the basic necessities of life: the issues of food, clothing, and body concerns. Jesus was talking about the people's anxiety of where the next meal would come from, how to keep warm, and how to stay alive.

Nowadays, we are concerned in completely different things: we worry about which cuisine to try, how to control our calorie intakes, what emollients to apply to the skin, and how to make things more ergonomic and fun, and less work.

We live in a different world than what Jesus and his contemporaries did. And because of this, we approach life from a completely different angle. Our assumption and expectation of life are radically different from those of Jesus' contemporaries. Jesus was talking about the basic survival needs of human being; we bring our own modern assumptions and expectations of life, when we hear the scriptures.

With this assumption, it is difficult to connect to the spirit of the biblical discourse, and appreciate what Jesus was talking about, because we are firmly entrenched in the modern amenity, luxury, and affluence that did not exist before in Jesus' time.

No matter how wealthy or poor, one needs to eat three meals a day. The only difference is that the wealthy worry about the menu, while the poor worry about the portion of food. Today, the wealthy ponder, if it would be a \$1000 dinner in the posh restaurant, or \$50 dinner at a regular one, while the poor worry, if it would be a PJ Sandwich or nothing.

There is more to what separates the modern from the ancient. We live in a complex and diversified society, and also created more areas of anxiety and worries. We are worried about our manufacturing jobs going overseas. We are sensitive about the Fed's decision to raise or lower a point in lending rate. We are troubled by the housing bubble bust. We are concerned about the Dow Jones Index. We are disturbed by the free trade agreements. We are living through the climatic changes whose seemingly irreversible consequence is yet to be seen. Jesus did not say anything about what to do when the global temperature rises by 1 degree, or when the industrial pollution affects the air and water qualities for millions and millions of people.

Do we have time to extend our worries to other people's welfare? There is plenty to worry. What about over 100,000 lives lost in the cyclone tragedy in Myanmar? What about the livelihood of the survivors? What about the military dictatorship that rules the country that put the ruling general's name on the aid packages? As if that is not enough, what about the earthquake that killed over 80,000 in China, about the shelters and food supplies for the millions of survivors who are now all homeless? Compared to these humanitarian disasters, what we have suffered from Hurricane Katrina pales.

Things that affect the human lives are not limited to a local area any more, and what happens in one place affects other areas of the world. As recently as this month, we heard about rising food price that affect many continents.

Anti-foreigner riot is ripe in South Africa : the South African working poor struggle against rising food prices, unemployment, and influx of immigrants fleeing the dictatorship and economic disaster in Zimbabwe .

On our soil, the frustration from the exodus of jobs to overseas along with all its support industries lead to the perception that immigrants are responsible for the lost jobs and higher taxes. But that is not so simple: Americans are not competing for jobs with those who risk their lives crossing the desert to find a job that pays \$10 an hour, working the field in the scorching heat. And rising food and gas prices in this nation are, contrary to elsewhere, bringing record profits to certain farming and oil industries.

In keeping with this global scale of things, even mistakes and mismanagement are ginormous in scale. Have you heard about the incompetence/corruption that was reported this past week? The Pentagon cannot account for \$15B of expenditure for this war in Iraq . That's in billions, not millions. In one instance, it was only a signature that consummated a handover of \$320M in cash supposedly for employing 1000 Iraqis, but no one knows for sure where the money went.

Today, we worry about far greater things than just what to eat, what to wear, what to drink. We worry about the misleaders of this nation frolicking in DC, who have been put in charge of the lives and wealth of this nation. Maybe, you did not need it before, but you may now, since I reminded you of all these. Would you like the prescription for Zoloft now? Or, would you rather turn to the scriptures?

The media report about the war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan , but far less about what the veterans go through, once they return home. Remember the infamous email the head of VA's mental health division, Dr. Ira Katz, advised the media spokesperson? It began with "Shh!..." It referred to 1000 veterans attempting suicide each month within VA facilities—1000 veterans each month!

When our soldiers come home all banged up and torn apart, not only in the body but also in the mind and spirit, shouldn't some one worry about the welfare of our soldiers, about their persons, relationships, marriages, and jobs? Would Jesus tell us not to worry? If we are not worried, shouldn't this lack of worry worry us?

Will the words spoken and the heads bowed in respect on Memorial Day, on behalf of the dead and the maimed, satisfy the moral obligations and the stately protocol? Will the American flags busily flapping in the wind, lining up the driveways of the cemeteries across the nation, heal the wounds and sooth the pain of loss? Will the declaration that the dead sacrificed their lives for the cause of freedom and democracy fill the void left by their absence?

Let us examine for a moment this Gentile thing. "The Gentiles seek all these things." Jesus is saying, they all do it, but for you, you should first seek the kingdom of Heaven and its righteousness. The Christian disciples are supposed to seek first and foremost the kingdom of Heaven and its righteousness.

I am not sure, if taking a pill would melt away our anxieties and pains. Does it solve the problems that caused the anxieties and pains in the first place, or does it make us numb to the problems and pains that we always carry?

I do believe that worrying is not any more the thing only the Gentiles do: it affects every human being on earth. I would like to ask Jesus to answer this question: How would seeking first the kingdom of Heaven solve all these worries and problems?

When Jesus taught his listeners, Jesus did not have the people of the 21st century in his mind: he was rather addressing his immediate audience and their clear and present context of life. Jesus would definitely address our own problems, if he were here today.

Sometimes we cannot help but notice that the Bible seems to have lost its relevance to the modern life. It is, therefore, the modern Christians' theological task to interpret the scripture in the light of the new context of life, so that God's timeless promise retains its relevance for the current generation.

Many seek their own selfish ends. Many do seek the righteousness of their own causes over those of the kingdom of Heaven . What if everyone changed their way of thinking, and started to see things from the kingdom perspective? What if people began to change one by one, seeking first the kingdom and its righteousness?

What would the world be like, if a great number of Christians believed—and actually practiced—the righteousness of the kingdom?

I really do not believe that only the Christians can be righteous. I believe any one could follow the righteousness of the kingdom. I believe that any one is a child of God, a child of Yahweh, a child of Allah, who seeks such righteousness, Gentile or Jew, slave or master, Christian or Muslim.

Wouldn't that be like making disciples of all races and all beliefs who would embrace the kingdom's righteousness, as opposed to the exclusive religious beliefs? Wouldn't such people make a better world for the rest of us to live in? Wouldn't "seeking first the kingdom and its righteousness" be a more appropriate understanding of making disciples for the modern world?

Worrying would not add to the span of life; worrying would actually lessen the span of life. So this is the prescription for the modern day:

Although there are many reasons to worry, we, the children of God choose to celebrate life instead. We choose to savor the rare, fleeting moments of life that come and go but leave us with the sense of gladness. We choose to learn to live the moment and dream of the more just future. We choose intentionally to notice the glory found in the wildflower blooming at the corner of the parking lot, over that of the Solomon's. We choose to be the wildflowers that cover the rugged terrain of bigotry and hatred.

No matter what may befall upon us, we choose to be faithful to the present day and seek first the kingdom of Heaven ; we will not cease to live each day the righteousness of the kingdom.