

29 January 2017

**Finding Joy . . . Through Perspective**  
Matthew 6:25-34; Proverbs 30:7-9

In some ways, the Sermon on the Mount is a daunting passage of scripture, like when Matthew 5:48 says that “You shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” But in the middle of this challenging sermon, Jesus offers this commandment, with a different tone. We read Matthew 6:25-34:

*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? <sup>26</sup>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? <sup>27</sup>And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? <sup>28</sup>And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, <sup>29</sup>yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. <sup>30</sup>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? <sup>31</sup>Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” <sup>32</sup>For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. <sup>33</sup>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.*

The Book of Proverbs is the only book in the Hebrew Bible (so far as we know) that includes writings from non-Israelites. Proverbs 30 is apparently one of these. It’s worth considering. We read verses 7-9:

*<sup>7</sup> Two things I ask of you;  
do not deny them to me before I die:  
<sup>8</sup> Remove far from me falsehood and lying;  
give me neither poverty nor riches;  
feed me with the food that I need,  
<sup>9</sup> or I shall be full, and deny you,  
and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’  
or I shall be poor, and steal,  
and profane the name of my God.*

We do not live in joyful times. You may have noticed this already. We live, instead, in an age of anxiety, fear, suspicion, partisanship, and anger, and I don’t really see that changing any time soon. Every day’s news brings some new political development that a year ago would have been unimaginable. And behind those immediate political changes are deeper ones, changes in our nation’s racial and cultural make-up, changes in the structure of our economy, changes in the way we communicate and relate to others. Change is always stressful, and joy does not co-exist easily with stress. We do not live in joyful times. And yet in Philippians Paul tells us, “Rejoice in

the Lord always. Again I say rejoice,” which is lovely and it has a nice beat and you can dance to it, but it’s easier said than done. So here we go: a month on being joyful.

But here’s my problem. Telling you in a sermon to be joyful won’t make you joyful. How many times at a conference or school assembly have you been told to “get excited”? Does that work? “Are you all excited to be here? I can’t hear you! Let’s try it again! Are you all excited to be here?” (I always wonder: does that over-caffeinated conference speaker realize that the only reason most of us are shouting is to make him leave us alone?) It doesn’t work. Nor is joy attainable by studying it. I can give excellent reasons to be joyful (“Think of your blood pressure.”), but it won’t do anything. Reading books on joy won’t help. Joy isn’t something we gain by dissecting it. Nor is it something we can acquire by force of will. We can’t follow a ten-step process and set our minds to being joyful, working at it diligently until we achieve joyfulness doggone it!. Joy doesn’t work like that. So what do we do? Well, let me suggest a different approach. What if joy isn’t an external thing that we try to catch, but rather is our natural inheritance from God? What if we were created to be joyful in the same breath with which God created the heavens and earth and called them “Very good”? After all, we were created to be in fellowship with God, and that should be joyful. If all this is so, then the question facing us is not what we must do to find joy, but rather what must we clear out of the way to allow our joy to find us.

*‘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?’* Thus Jesus begins his famous speech at the end of Matthew 6. This passage, I believe, is key to opening ourselves to joy. Worry prohibits joy – worry about *anything*. Jesus even says not to worry about the basic requirements of life. This is puzzling to us, but here’s what that made me think of: when our mission team got back from its week in Guatemala, where they worked with and among people who live on the very edge of having nothing at all, one of the mission team said to me: “Those people, those children, who have nothing – they seem so much happier than we are.” Why do you think that might be?

I don’t have an answer. I have zero moral authority here. I don’t know how not to worry, and I especially can’t imagine living on the edge of poverty, unsure where my next meal might come from, without worrying. But then I realize, how would I know? I’ve never been in that position. I don’t get anxious about food and shelter. You know what sort of thing *does* make me anxious? Losing my pen. I *hate* losing my pen. It’s a nice pen. Or having a problem with my computer. I hate that. I can’t rest until it’s working right again. You understand. And I’m sure if I tried to explain that to those Guatemalan children they’d totally understand, too, right? So what do you worry about? Let’s put those worries through the Guatemala test and look at them through a Mayan villager’s eyes. The stock market feel shaky? *You have money you don’t need for your next meal?* Your property tax bill went up? *You own a house? How big is it?* Whether your clothes are out of fashion? *How many different sets of clothes do you have?* Looking at things through different eyes is what we call “perspective.” It’s what Jesus was trying to do when he said, “Look at the birds of the air and the lilies of the field,” and we need it.

The fact is, by historical and global standards most of us are fabulously wealthy. So why are we so joyless? It seems that the more we have, the more we worry about what we have, and

the less satisfied we are with what we do have. All that adds up to increased worry. And the only way to break that cycle is to step outside the echoing voices of our own brain and look at our worries through someone else's eyes. Perspective.

And while I'm on the subject, there's another area in which we could use some perspective: politics and the news. As I suggested at the start of this sermon, much of the joylessness I perceive today, in myself as well, comes as a result of the news that we get each day. This isn't surprising. The past two weeks have been . . . memorable. One day, I believe, the young attendants at my nursing home will ask me if I remember the Trump presidency. History books will be written about this period, and whether you approve of it or not, you can't deny it is a time of huge disruption. But even as we live through this time, we need perspective. When I see democrat friends whose entire being has been consumed by either anger or abject misery since the election, I want to ask: "Really? Is your capacity for joy so entirely dependant on what our government does?" That doesn't feel like a good plan. Even when your candidate's in office, that feels like a bad horse to hitch your wagon to. If our joy in life is tied to politics, we will never know joy at all. In this area, too, we need perspective.

Now I realize I'm a white Christian male citizen with employer health insurance and thus I'm more protected than any other group in America, so yeah it's easy for me to say, "We need perspective." But it's still true. Let us try to look at our political worries through different eyes. For instance, when Paul wrote those words "Rejoice in the Lord always" he was in prison awaiting execution. His crime was believing that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. This is the prisoner who wrote the New Testament book on joy. How would Paul look on our times? *You have the right to publically oppose your government without being executed? Huh! And you can write letters to your leaders and you not only won't be put in prison, but they might listen? Whoa! You get to choose new leaders in a few years if you like? That's amazing.* Please hear me now. I am *not* saying to relax and do nothing. I'm just pointing out that we are amazingly fortunate that we live in a nation where it is the right and duty of citizens to voice their opinion to their government and to protest and resist injustice wherever they see it. So do it. But know this: whatever actions we pursue in the political sphere are not going to bring us joy, any more than a new BMW will. Our joy, the joy that God created us to know, must come from somewhere else.

If joy is ever to break through the chains we have wrapped around it, we must simplify. We must reduce the clutter of our material consumption and filter the clamor of over- and mis-information. Neither task is easy. Our advertising industry has one goal: to make us dissatisfied with our lives. We are besieged by the lie that we cannot be happy until we have this or that product. In the same way, much of our media has the goal of creating anxiety. The 24-hour cable news networks have done this for years, treating every story as earth-shatteringly important BREAKING NEWS, but now we have even worse industry: internet "news" outlets whose goal is to increase traffic on their site at all costs and who, toward that end, uses exaggerated or just false headlines. Making people angry is their business model. These are two things we desperately need to de-clutter from our lives. Do you really need more clothes? Another electronic device? More tools? Do you really need to read four different articles on the same news event, all of them confirming what you already thought? Listen to that many hours of radio news? Do you need to watch that political talk show speculating on things that they don't really know more about than you? Or is all that clutter getting in the way of something you need more?

Step back. Simplify. *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? . . . And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? . . . Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. . . So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.*

And one more. *But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

These are not joyful times. There is much around us to make us anxious, and anxiety kills joy. But perspective cures anxiety. How about this: on Monday, while protests swelled at airports around the country and the internet and Twitterverse were exploding with outrage on every side, Michael Del Conte, our 16-year-old member with a catastrophic spinal injury, moved his right foot and was able to kick a soccer ball that a therapist rolled to him. That's perspective. God is good. All the time.