

Living the Good Life

A sermon by Joe Hoffman, May 25, 2008

I think all of us want to live a good life. To use our time on Earth well. To take the spirit that is in us, to use the body that our spirit resides in, and to live a good life that when we come to the end of our days we can say – I lived well. I used my time and resources well. I engaged with the world around me well. I can let go of this earthly life now and be at peace.

A friend of mine, Jane Curan, has said – in order to die a good death, we must live a good life. This is a journey from the time of our birth. How we live along the way matters.

But to live a good life does not depend on having lots of money or always being successful. Each of us can have a good life – even a great life – by being who we are. By honoring the spirit that is within us. By trusting the One who has given us the life we have.

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is trying to teach the disciples – and all of us who are overhearing – about how to live a good life. In a sense, this is a collection of sayings, one might say a collection of wisdom thoughts. Sagely advice. And we could take each saying and just ponder it alone.

Where your treasure is, there will your heart be.

No one can serve two superiors.

Stop worrying about tomorrow. Today has enough troubles of its own.

Look at the birds in the sky – aren't you more important than they?

These are great sayings, and when we aren't perplexed and drowning in the struggles of our day, when we have the time to sit and ponder philosophically the world we live in, then these are great things to ponder. But while Jesus is saying, look at the birds and the flowers, we are saying – look at the bills! If I don't worry about these today, I probably am not going to have the money tomorrow to pay them. Look at the world! If I don't do something today to make it better, what will be left for me to do tomorrow. Look at the exams coming up. If I don't study now, I probably won't have much chance of passing them.

The book of Matthew is about how to be a faithful Christian in a changing world and in difficult circumstances. It is not an attempt to be simplistic or dualistic. It is not to suggest that life will not be challenging. It is not to suggest that the faithful will never doubt or struggle. It is not to suggest that bad things will never happen to good and faithful people.

This gospel story offers us a lens on the world through faith in God. Jesus points us towards what is most important. It is so easy to get distracted. You know how it is. We get going somewhere and run into this person or that, start talking, and then we can't remember where we were going. Or maybe that is just me these days. We start doing something and can't remember why we are doing it. Am I the only one – or can you relate to this?

Fred Craddock tells the story of a woman who was a nurse working with patients who were critically ill – and often died. She spent her days caring for patients who were hurting and afraid, caring for families who were grieving and anxious. And she would come home at the end of the day, exhausted, and say – I can't do this anymore. I am not going back to work tomorrow. And then tomorrow would come, and she would get up and do it all over again. What was she thinking? What changed over night? Perhaps it was that her exhausted distracted her, her frustration at not being able to help every patient survive, her inability to help every family know that everything would be okay. Because sometimes patients die. Sometimes things don't work out the way we hope.

But when she would get up and go back the next day – it was because she remembered what was important. That she is not God. That she brings a life line to all those who are struggling. That the journey is better because of her presence in the midst of it. That she had gifts and abilities that made her very good at what she did. That tomorrow always brings God with it.

Jesus is not suggesting that we expect God to take care of everything for us. If we want to eat supper, we probably need to get up and fix something. If we want to express our appreciation for something that someone has done for us, we probably should give them a call, or write them a note. Things like this don't just happen. We live these lives and part of being human is doing these very things. To do these things is to live the lives we have been given. The birds have what they need as they fly around – there is food, and water, and the joy of being a bird. To have a good life as a bird is to do the things birds do and do them well.

To live a good life for us is to be the best person we can be. To trust what is important. And what is important ultimately not money or big houses or social status. We may have these things. And the more we have, the more easily we can become distracted by having to care for it all. Tom Long says – The lifestyles of the rich and famous are the lifestyles of the always vulnerable and fearful. Because the rich and famous depend on the financial markets to keep their wealth abundant. They depend on an economy where some have a lot and others have little – for we do know now that there is not enough to go around for all of us to have the good life as it is depicted in the American dream. To have all we want whenever we want it. We are upset by the rising gas prices – but have not yet changed the way we drive. The good life we are taught to dream of is not sustainable for long or for many. And what a burden to carry – trying to keep up with all that stuff. With all the taxes. Trying to keep up with those who still have more than we have.

But all of us can live a good life. That's the focus of this text. That's the theme that runs through these various sayings. All of us can have a good life if we just remember who we are, if we remember that we are given life and breath to enjoy the gifts of God around us and in us. We find the good life when we are able to embody as fully as possible the spirit in us. When we can orient our lives not towards a dream that cannot sustain us or the world, but instead toward the One who has given us life and calls us to live it joyfully and fully.

The bottom line seems to be this: We can trust in God to give us what we need.

Now, we have enough experience to know that sometimes that doesn't seem to be true. Some of us have lost a job, and have prayed for a job, and nothing came – or at least, nothing came right away. We know the tragedy of not having health insurance, and getting sick, and not having the money to get the care we need. We know the grief of being well, and suddenly getting sick, and praying fervently to be healed, but the doctors in all their wisdom not being able to find the cure. We know of people starving and needing food and shelter, and we have not been able to find a way to spread the bounty in time to relieve their misery.

So we might say that trust in God is elusive. Or at least very slow. So what are we trusting? We are trusting a God that seems to be hard to find sometimes. That is often silent. That is often absent. That is often unavailable in our time of greatest need. But no. This text calls us back. Calls us to remember that what we can trust is that God provides us with dignity – whoever we are, whatever our circumstance – dignity. God provides us with a sense of worth – whoever we are, whatever else someone may have said about us – a sense of worth. God provides us with a sense of confidence that we are loved and treasured. No matter what happens. No matter how often someone tries to convince us that we are a nobody. We are loved and treasured.

Furthermore, if we can treasure these things ourselves – in ourselves and in one another, in the world around us – if we can be about living into the world as God imagines it to be, as God longs for it to be – then we will be like the nurse who might, at the end of the day, want to quit her job, because she is tired and can't see the big picture anymore. But when she rests, when she awakes tomorrow, she knows again that God is with her, that she has important, and life fulfilling work to do, that her life matters.

Isn't that what we want – to have a life that counts for something. To get to the end of our day – or our lives – and know that our life has counted for something. That we have lived our dignity well, we have taken our self worth and used it for good, that we have lived the confidence that we are loved and treasured in such a way that others have found that gift for themselves too.

When I grow weary – I love to read the poem that is on the front of the bulletin today.

When despair for the world grows in me

And I wake in the night at the least sound

In fear of what my life and my children's lives may be
I go and lie down where the wood drake
Rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds
I come into the peace of wild things
Who do not tax their lives with forethought
Of grief, I come into the presence of still water
And I feel above me the day blind stars
Waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and I am free.

think the grace that Wendell Berry speaks of us God. I think Jesus is reminding us to live in the
grace that is God. So may we live such a good life.

Amen.