

Matthew 6, the Sermon on the Mount

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by

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I'm sure many of you were as **exhilarated** as I was, after the 18 day revolt, led by the young people of Egypt, ousted President Hosni Mubarek earlier this month. Fusing their expertise of the Internet and social networks with tactics of nonviolent resistance in Cairo's Tahrir Square, the protesters had only **one** goal: the fall of the 30 year regime, with Mubarek leaving. They resisted the heavily armed riot police, Internet and cell phone service being cut off for 5 days, then Mubarek loyalists and paid police thugs attacking them with rocks, clubs, improvised explosives, and guns for two days. Eventually 365 protesters would die during the revolution. The people never wavered from their **one** demand for Mubarek to go, resisting his feeble attempts at a too little, too late political reform and the United States' confusing, ambivalent support. The hundreds of thousands gathered in Tahrir square wanted to hear Mubarek say only one word: Goodbye. Tired of police abuse and torture, disregard for human rights and freedoms, corruption, and the grinding poverty of people surviving on \$2 a day, the savvy young protesters rallied the rest of the Egyptian population, especially the poor, for a democratic rebellion with slogans such as "they are eating pigeon and chicken, but we eat beans every day," "lift your head high, you're an Egyptian," and "**we** are staying, **he** is going." But the cry that stuck foremost in my mind, which was uttered every time the government conceded on an issue, was the Arabic chant, allahu akbar, God is great. All the standard divisions, which had previously split the opposition against the government, disappeared: Christians united with Muslims and Muslims joined with secular, liberal groups. There were **only** Egyptians and their **one** demand was for Mubarek to go. People were willing to fight and die for that **single** outcome, because the psychological barrier of fear, the only **real** obstacle to revolutionary change, now sweeping across North Africa and the Middle East, especially Libya, had been overcome.

It is this single-minded devotion of the Egyptians to one goal, one ideal, that is the parallel with our Gospel passage, a section from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. Jesus seems to give rather stark warnings on money, worry, food, and clothing. Or to quote author Mark Twain, "It is not what I don't understand in the Bible that troubles me; it is what is perfectly clear

that bothers me.” The Rosetta stone, the key to understanding not only our passage, but the **entire** Sermon, is verse 33, which in a contemporary translation by Eugene Peterson reads, “Steep your life in God-reality and God-worship. Give your attention to what God is doing right **now**. Don’t worry about missing out. You will find **all** your everyday human concerns will be met. Don’t get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.” So as disciples of Christ, our main concern should be furthering the reign of God in our lives and in the world. If we see this verse as **the** central organizing principle, then the earlier verses about money, worry, food, and clothes make more sense and are less intimidating.

For example, in the Greek translation, when Jesus speaks of worry, he means something that absorbs our attention and divides our energy, implying anxiety arises from making something other than God our ultimate concern or priority. Or to quote an old proverb, “Worry is like a rocking chair. It will give you something to do, but it won’t get you anywhere.” Of course, being concerned, being prepared, and planning for the future are all good things. God **knows** what our particular needs are. The problem occurs when those plans take control over our lives and when fulfilling those hopes and dreams takes on **more** importance than following God. Jesus is concerned that being so **preoccupied** with our money and possessions, we fall into loving **things** and using **people**, instead of loving **people** and using **things**. Jesus almost equates worry and obsession with money to **idolatry**, which is when we take something **other** than God and give it the place of God in our lives. God wants to bring us to that place where we give up control and come to a spiritual space of radical trust and dependence upon God, doing things God’s way rather than ours. Like the **wildflowers** we learn that God really does provide everything we need, and **has** been providing for us all **along** the way. A wildflower doesn’t have any control over what happens to it. Everything good that befalls it—all its beauty, water, soil, and sunshine, is a **gift** from God. The flower is not in control; God **is**. And so Jesus says to us, live like **that**.

Jesus says we must choose a master. The issue isn’t money, work, relationships, smartphones, or the Internet. The problem is when these secondary pursuits kick God out of being the **top** priority in our lives. We shouldn’t be defined by our worries. The aim of God’s reign is to **free** us from anxiety, contrary to what a good friend once remarked to me, “My priorities are God, my family, my church, and my job. I just haven’t had time for the first three lately.” Jesus is saying, “Don’t you get it yet? God will never abandon you, so **relax**, don’t be so preoccupied with **getting**, then

you can respond to God's **giving**." All our other loves must be compatible **with**, not in competition **with**, our primary commitment to God. The problem with **control** is that it is all about **us**, thinking that our **own** efforts can provide everything we need. This preoccupation with control disguises our **futile** attempts to avoid suffering and death. When we suffer and die, we lose ultimate control of our lives and surrender it into the hands of God. Or as Don Henley, the former lead singer of the rock band The Eagles, wrote in one of his songs on his solo CD, *The End of Innocence*, "You spend your whole life just piling it up. You've got stacks and stacks. Then the angel Gabriel comes and taps you on the shoulder. But you don't see **any** hearses with luggage racks!"

The basic question is always, Is God **first** in our lives or not? The way to refocus our spiritual energy, as Jesus suggests with his analogy to the birds, is to consider not what we want God to **do** for us, but rather what God **has** done and **is** doing for us right now: to notice the blessings in our lives. This is contrasted by a Peanuts cartoon when Linus, dragging his blanket, comes upon a downcast Charlie Brown and says to Charlie, "You look kinda depressed." "I worry about school a lot," Charlie Brown replies. Then he adds, "I worry about my **worrying** so much about school." As Charlie and Linus sit on a log together, Charlie Brown makes his final observation — "My anxieties have **anxieties**." Focusing on our blessings counteracts our "anxieties having anxieties," because it begins to dawn on us that we are constantly being touched by grace, and Jesus, often in disguise, is invading our lives all the time, and once we start recognizing his presence we can surrender our fears that we won't be taken care of, realizing there is **no** underlying reason to be anxious. In the end, Jesus says to us, "Let's make a deal. If you will replace pursuing minor goals with pursuing what is most spiritually alive, then I will throw in these secondary pursuits as a divinely added bonus."

As our first reading makes clear, we needn't fear God. Isaiah uses a feminine image to describe our relationship with God, that of a mother feeding her child. Not only is the child at the mother's breast suggesting we find our sustenance from God, but this is a child who was carried and born from the mother's body. Just as a woman won't forget the child of her womb, God having created us as God's children will never forget or forsake us. Thus it is no surprise that the Hebrew word for tenderness and compassion is derived from the word for womb. What better metaphor to speak of God's total commitment to our needs, than a mother nourishing her child, a complete giving of oneself, a sensual, intimate bond revealing the basis of our trust in God. God's attachment to us can **never** be severed!

Our gospel implies that the presence of persistent worry and anxiety may be a sign that we've become too absorbed by our own concerns, too consumed with our needs, and that we should allow God to help us consider how to attend to those who need something that **we** can offer **them**. How do we become a sign and vessel of God's mercy in this world and serve God by turning our multiple daily tasks into opportunities to minister God's nearness and love to others by doing what Jesus would do if Jesus were in our place? Our gospel challenges us to trust God in every circumstance and to focus **first** on being Jesus for people in need by loving everyone for the sake of God, which will become the central prism through which all our **other** concerns are to be reflected and then those concerns will fall into their rightful places of priority. By focusing on others and pursuing God's righteousness and justice for our world, we are freed from a rat-race anxiety and reassured that we are safe with God, that **all** our needs will be satisfied, we will experience true joy, and we will learn how to use our money, resources, and talents in a life-manner. Apart from receiving terrifying threats from the Ku Klux Klan, civil rights leader Martin Luther King was also harassed by the police. He did his first stint in jail in 1960 after being arrested for driving 5 miles per hour over the speed limit. The night after his release from that imprisonment he was at home when the phone rang. A menacing voice on the other end called him a racial slur and then said, "We are tired of you and if you aren't out of this town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out **and** blow up your house." King was unnerved and very afraid - not just for himself- but also for his wife and his little children. Shortly after the phone call, he sat at his kitchen table drinking a cup of coffee and later said, "I sat at that table thinking about my little girl and thinking about the fact that she could be taken away from me at any minute. And I got to the point where I couldn't take it anymore. And I had to know if God was **real** for myself. I said, 'Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage ...And it seemed to me at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, 'Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you, even until the end of the world.'...I heard the voice of Jesus commanding me to fight on. He promised never to leave me, alone." Three nights later the threat made in that phone call came true: a bomb exploded on the front porch of Dr. King's home. Fortunately, no one was hurt. But King was able to get through it thanks to that earlier time of spiritual struggle. He said, "My religious experience a few nights before had given me the strength to face it."

Just as many of the Egyptian protesters were sustained and comforted by faith in their God, our gospel reassures us that by surrendering our fears and trusting God, we will be given everything **we** need and we **can** rely on God to create ultimate meaning, control, and security for our lives. And if we have that **sole** reliance on God and are willing to witness through our **actions**, to all the wonderful blessings God **has** given and is giving us **now**, our gospel promises that what occurred with the Egyptian protesters, will happen to us, for from within our **own** souls, we **too** will shout joyfully aloud, **allahu akbar**...God is great!