

## Birds, Lilies, and Us

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Luke 12:22-34

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I grew up believing this scripture. In Hershey, Pennsylvania, we had all that we could possibly want—and more. We felt lucky to grow up in a town with a chocolate factory and an amusement park, and nobody we knew was hungry or homeless. We were reminded often in the First United Methodist Church on Chocolate Avenue, where the domes on the streetlights were shaped like Hershey's kisses, that we were blessed. God loved us.

But then, when I was in college, I journeyed to Harlem and met people in a struggle to survive its poverty and violence. And soon after that, I witnessed the distended bellies of malnourished children in war-torn Nicaragua and in apartheid-strangled South Africa, where row upon row of child-sized graves had been dug in ominous expectation. This scripture passage seemed to be a mockery of their privation and pain.

Luke's rendering of Jesus' words here is missing a phrase that appears in Matthew's version. Matthew says, "But strive first for the kingdom—or the realm—of God and God's *righteousness*, and all these things will be given to you as well." *Righteousness*, I have been reminded, by Mahan among others, means "right relationship." Children die of starvation, not because God wills it or overlooks their cries, but because we have not learned how to live justly and generously.

This promise of Jesus isn't a promise to individuals; it's a promise to the community. We have all that we need; the only question is whether we will share it, so that all are recipients of the bounty. If so, the audacious promise holds. If not, some among us do indeed need to worry about what they will eat and drink and wear, spending all of their energy trying to meet these basic needs.

We have not heeded Jesus' words; we have not kept the promise. The disparities and divisions in our world boggle the imagination. A recent report by the United Nations states that the world's three richest families own more wealth than its 48 poorest countries. Corporate CEOs rake in millions, while laborers in fields here and in sweatshops around the globe slave for pennies a day to grow, pick, or manufacture cheap goods for our consumption. Half the world's population—three billion people—live on less than two dollars per day. We are moved by the cries of the victims of unjust systems, even as we are deeply entangled in this web of disparity.

I spent a few evenings last week watching a six-part DVD series, produced by some friends at Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries in California, called *Mammon or Manna?* I hope actually to use it for a Christian education series during the Sunday school hour sometime in the next year.

You may remember the scripture that declares, "You cannot serve God and mammon," or wealth. Friend, theologian, and biblical scholar Ched Myers identifies our society as a mammon culture, stricken with an epidemic of "affluenza"—the term coined for a public TV series about our over-consumptive lifestyle—with the symptoms of alienation, anxiety, and addiction.

Ched contrasts this with the manna culture of the early Israelites, whose first lesson in the wilderness after they fled from slavery in Egypt was economic equality. God sent manna from heaven, and the Israelite families were ordered to pick up only what they needed. If they hoarded, Exodus 16 reports, the manna "bred worms and turned foul." Our early ancestors in the faith were formed in that wilderness into a community based on equality and committed to the common good, where the needs of all were met.

Before they left and headed toward the Promised Land, God commanded that they put a measure of manna in a jar, to be a reminder for generations to come of how they ought to live. I'd like to know what happened to that jar. As soon as the wilderness was out of sight, the hoarding and accumulating began. People went into debt and were forced into slavery when they couldn't repay. Some among them grew rich, and others became destitute; some were satiated, while others died for lack of food. They suffered on a societal level what we experience on a global level today.

The Old Testament prophets regularly chastised the people for their greedy and exploitive ways, commanding them to care for widows, orphans, foreigners (those who are today labeled "illegal aliens" by our culture), and others on the economic margins. Jesus, who lived a dispossessed life on the run, surrounded himself with such as these. And he picked up the refrain about living justly and righteously and tending to the needs of all. His parable about the "rich fool" who kept tearing down and building

bigger barns in order to hold all his surplus wealth was the basis of Missy's wonderful reflections on this theme last Sunday night.

Ched Myers quotes German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies, who uses the terms *Gemeinschaft*, meaning community, which is everything that holds human relationships together, despite all that would pull them apart. And *Gesellschaft*, or capitalist society, which he describes as everything that would pull human relationships apart, despite all that holds them together.

Our culture is full of forces that tear apart human relationship. On a global scale, we are a workaholic nation, finding much of our identity in what we produce and what we consume. Laptops, cell phones, and the Internet have turned us into a 24/7 work society, in which there are no limits of time or space to our work and consumption. We can turn our car into a business office and shop online at home in the middle of the night. We suffer from stratification and privatization, the dispossession of the local by the global, and the atrophy of the communal in deference to the sovereignty of the individual.

Ched invites us to move from being a culture of mammon—with quick profit and accumulation at the expense of human solidarity—to a culture of manna—with mutual aid and a reclaiming of the idea of “commonwealth.” The vehicle he proposes is “Sabbath Economics,” picking up on the order from God in Exodus 16 that the Israelites should gather a double portion of manna on the sixth day of the week and rest on the seventh. This, says Ched, moved them from a life centered on work to a life centered in community, from finding their value in *doing* to finding it in *being*. And it set limits on human activity—limits that I believe are sorely needed in our time.

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Ched calls Sabbath economics “the personal and political struggle to embody the culture of manna in the midst of the culture of mammon.” That’s a struggle that I’d like to embark upon with some sisters and brothers in this Circle.

I want to believe tonight’s scripture from Luke with the same childlike faith that I believed it when I was growing up—even though I now know all the facts. I want to choose faith over fear in the way that I relate to money and economic security. And I’d like our nation to do the same. If we decided to abandon our greed and share rather than exploit and threaten other global citizens, we might actually have something resembling true national security.

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Ched ends the *Mammon or Manna?* series by sharing about an experience of hospice care that he, his partner Elaine Enns, and their community provided for Ladon Sheats. Ladon was a young businessman converted by Clarence Jordan during a stint at Koinonia Partners in Georgia in the 1950s to a long life of peace activism. Ladon died of pancreatic cancer without any money, no retirement account. He gave away what little he earned all along the way. He was cared for at the end by his beloved friends, who came from all across the country in shifts to keep vigil by his bedside. He trusted the audacious promise of Luke 12; and the promise held.

Ched raises a question about the race in this culture to sock away enough money in health and retirement accounts and long-term insurance so that we can afford to have total strangers take care of us in our last days. His reflections went right to my heart, as my sisters and I try to navigate our mother’s final days on this earth. As I announced a couple of weeks ago, my Mom was admitted to hospice at the end of July with a diagnosis of “failure to thrive.”

During the days my sisters and I spent at her dementia-care facility in Charlotte, I was surprised once again at how challenging and difficult it is in this culture to advocate for a dignified death. Mom is in end-stage Alzheimer’s, no longer able to recognize us or care for herself. But she is otherwise in good health, and her doctor told us that she is likely to live another three to four years.

We've observed as many of the residents in her facility are shuttled back and forth from being curled up in bed to slumped over in wheelchairs, languishing in long, wasting-away dyings. This is not the future that we want for our mother, and she has made clear in conversations and in her living will that this is not the future that she wants, either. We have asked the facility staff not to feed Mom when she is no longer able to feed herself, a time that appears to be coming soon.

One blessing is that my sisters and I are in agreement that this is the most loving and gentle option for our mother at this point. Another is that Mom—who hasn't been able to track a conversation or answer a question in many months—had a rare—actually miraculous, I believe—moment of lucidity while we were there. When we introduced her to the hospice nurse who came to visit, Mom looked him in the eyes and declared clear as day, "Everybody has to die." He asked her if she was ready to die, and Mom said, "Yes, I'm ready."

Our culture has made great strides when it comes to artificially prolonging life. We can sign a paper refusing ventilators and feeding tubes, CPR and antibiotics. But I'm learning that nowhere can you sign up for "When I can no longer feed myself, please don't feed me." The birds of the air surely have a better system. There must be a corollary to God's providing what we need to include the truth that sometimes what we need is to give thanks for a good life and let it go.

It may be that the only way to save my mother from a long, miserable, slow deterioration is to remove her from the facility and bring her here to my home for her final days. I've participated in a few gentle, holy home dyings, and this feels like a gift I can give her if it becomes necessary. But I do not find it easy to consider. Accepting death is so alien in our culture that it feels at times overwhelming to me to ponder doing what people have done for centuries of human history—gently ushered their loved ones on to the next life in their homes.

I'm reminded almost daily of how entangled I am in a culture that denies death—and life—in so many ways; a culture that does its best to keep us from nurturing the relationships that are so much more critical to our well-being than money. The Luke 12 promise held for my friend Ladon because he lived the way he wanted to die—surrounded by friends, nurturing the connections, counting on the relationships cultivated over a lifetime; trusting that he didn't need to worry about what he would eat or drink or wear; giving all of himself to furthering God's realm, and knowing that all that he needed would be provided in return. His treasure was where his heart was—with his friends.

Yesterday afternoon Mark Siler and I walked Swan Mountain Farm's beautiful llama, Brie, down Jones Cove Road to join our little flock of sheep at their new home on a neighbor's farm. Tomorrow morning Mark, Kiran, Joy, and Leigh leave for their year in Guatemala and Cuba, where Mark will shepherd pastors looking to launch a chaplaincy program in Cuba's prisons.

This is the beginning of a year of transition on the farm and a season of letting go for me. I'm spending most of my daylight hours working on the cancer memoir of my dear friend Murphy Davis of the Open Door Community in Atlanta, who is for the fourth time in fourteen years attempting to conquer a rare lymphoma with rounds of heavy-duty chemotherapy.

In the evenings, I'm spending a bit of time before I go to sleep each night thinking of my Mom. She was notorious in our family for buying cheap paintings of landscapes and bouquets at the "five-and-dime"—the downscale, 1960s version of today's big-box stores. Over time, splashes of bright purple, pink, and orange would appear in these paintings hung on the walls of my childhood home—odd flowers suddenly dotting subtly green trees or popping up in pastel bouquets, where Mom thought a little more color was needed.

She is no longer able wield a paintbrush. She has believed at various times recently that I am her grandmother, that a 12-foot-long albino alligator with blue eyes is prowling around her assisted-living facility, and that a famous astronaut lives next door to her ("But he's very down-to-earth about it," she declared, totally missing the irony). The mother I have known is gone, and I tried to think of a way to honor and accompany her in her last days.

The day after she was admitted into hospice, I began a search. It ended with the online purchase of "Lakeside Village"—a 20" x 16" paint-by-number landscape, with splashes of flowers throughout, 42 brilliant colors of paint to apply, and more than a thousand tiny spaces to fill in.

I have not done a paint-by-number in about four decades, and my eyesight has declined a bit in those years. But every night, as I painstakingly brush another color onto the white-and-gray cardboard, I commune with my mother, remembering the woman she was and offering prayerful focus to the journey she is on now.

People with Alzheimer's disease often suffer from gaps in their brains, along with debilitating tangles. I believe it's the gaps that are the real problem, the separations that over time become impossible to bridge, creating an emptiness in those of us who find that someone we love is lost and unreachable. As I paint each night, I ponder the rhythms of letting go and embracing whatever is around the corner, trusting that the empty spaces will be filled; knowing that sometimes connection can happen only in the gaps where mystery resides. And rejoicing that reunions are on the horizon when the wanderers return—and when we all get to heaven.

Jesus said to his followers, "Do not worry about your life...God knows what you need...Strive for God's realm, and all these things will be given unto you. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Amen.