

“Eating Righteously”

Scripture

Matthew 6:24-34 (*The Message*)

²⁴"You can't worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you'll end up hating the other. Adoration of one feeds contempt for the other. You can't worship God and Money both.

²⁵"If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship, it follows that you don't fuss about what's on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body.

²⁶Look at the birds, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, careless in the care of God. And you count far more to him than birds. ²⁷"Has anyone by fussing in front of the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? ²⁸All this time and money wasted on fashion - do you think it makes that much difference? Instead of looking at the fashions, walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They never primp or shop, ²⁹but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them. ³⁰"If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers - most of which are never even seen - don't you think he'll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you? ³¹What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with getting, so you can respond to God's giving. ³²People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. ³³Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. ³⁴"Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and 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.

Scripture

Matthew 6:24-34 (*NRSV*)

²⁴"No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

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

Scripture

Matthew 5:6 (NRSV)

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Our Sunday evening Bible study was on Abraham becoming the first believer in the one God, last week. Looking back more than three thousand years of history makes it hard to see how earth-shaking a moment this was. Today, Jews, Christians and Muslims are all heirs of Abraham's faith so that at least half the people of the world are monotheists. But what brought the lesson home was the part about how Abraham's belief in the one God was so very different than what had been believed by everyone else, back then.

Digging out 35 year old notes from my Jewish religion professor at San Diego State University, I told the class how the polytheistic religions worked. Of course, there were gods and goddesses like Baal, Molech, Zeus and Juno. But all of these and humans being came from the same stuff – I don't know, plasma, or chaos or fate or the Force – some elemental goop which was the world's basic building block. And so, while the gods and goddesses must be appeased and could be capricious, humans had a chance of surviving and sometimes besting there larger rulers, by playing one god off another, or by using magic which had the power of the elemental universe in it, and which could persuade the gods to do things your way.

In the class we talked about how this principal still operates in our day. I evoked the image of a Redskins fan watching the Sunday game on the television, or maybe at the stadium, having in their minds what Dave Barry once called, "thought rays." In other words, if you had enough intensity, you could think a good play to happen on the TV screen or on the field. Another class member said that worry was her magic pill. If she was concerned about a situation or another person, if she did her worrying, that would be the sacrifice needed to

make everything okay. The class was revealing, in how it showed what pagans we still are!

I say, because when Abraham believed in the one God, believed that the one God was revealing himself/herself to Abraham, all of the triangulation – the working of one god against another or the manipulation of the elemental stuff of the universe against a god or another person – all of that was gone. God is one. There is no intermediary to work. God reveals to Abraham and all Abraham can do is respond directly.

As the week went on, and I thought further about our lesson, it kept hitting me that our faith is about responsibility, or make that two words, response ability.

In the Abraham story, Abraham does right in believing in God, and it is reckoned to him as righteousness. Then God, in God's gracious and loving character makes a covenant with Abraham and Sarah, to bless them with promises and a relationship, asking their faithfulness in return. The Hebrew word for covenant is mitzvah. We know it for the commissioning service used for young people, where they are bar mitzvahed or bat mitzvahed. The word for righteousness or justice is quite similar: misphat. Such similarity is fitting, for in the directness of the covenantal relationship formed with God, justice defines how we should act with one another.

So, we have a blessing in our beatitude for today for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for justice. The "righteousness" of this blessing is defined in similar directness. Recalling that loving one's neighbor as oneself is the second part in the covenant where we are to love God, this misphat, this justice, this righteousness is defined by interpreters of the Sermon of the Mount as "the way of life of people who are generous with what they have, who speak for justice whenever possible, and who seek to do good in behalf of others." In other words, just as we are to respond to God directly because there is no other god, we are also to be in direct and unavoidable relationship with our neighbor as a way of being faithful to the one, covenant-making God.

Our other text from Matthew this morning, talks of one of the things that distracts us from such righteousness and justice. "You cannot serve God and mammon," or in other words, "you cannot serve God and money." And then Jesus goes on with his compelling words about the beauty of the lilies of the field and the care which

God has for even the most insignificant of little birds. “And God clothes you, and God cares for you, so much more.”

We hear encouragements to simplicity in these uplifting words, no doubt, but there is more to them than just flower and flight. There is in them an invitation to respond to God with a deep trust. Oh yes, the mortgage is still due at the first of the month and our clothes will wear out and compel us to another trip to the mall. But even as we pour over the checkbook figuring how to make it all balance, our greater concern of being endowed with dignity, of living with the knowledge that we are treasured by God is enough to reassure us to act faithfully with what we have.

And in addition we are asked to discern how “living *the* good life pails to living *a* good life.” Joel Osteen of health and wealth Gospel fame, tells a story in his book Your Best Life Now, of how he views blessing. He tells it over and against what he calls, cheese and crackers Christianity. Cheese and crackers Christianity is where you don’t get it when God wants to prosper you. He tells the story of his father who as a Pentecostal preacher never made more than \$115 per week. One time they had a revival in their church and the visiting minister stayed in the Osteen home. He therefore ate three meals a day and it was a strain on an already strained budget. At the end of the week the week the one wealthy person in the congregation recognized what Pastor Osteen had done and came up to him saying, “I know it’s been a difficult week,” here, and handed him a check for \$1000. Osteen said, “my father took one look at it and hesitated for a moment, and then said, “I cannot accept it,” endorsed it and put it in the offering plate. And Osteen has nothing but contempt, saying “My father had a cheese and cracker Christianity.” In fact, his father knew well what it is to trust a God who is to be served only, not putting one’s trust in mammon, in any other god who would tempt us to confusion.

That’s not to say that we must all take vows of poverty to be believers. It is to say that we ought to be responsible with where put our trust, and that we ought also to be generous with others and advocate for justice and the well-being of our neighbor. If we hunger and thirst for these things, the God who is revealed to us will fill us with the blessings of dignity and care.

We are headed into a season of stewardship here at church. Our national financial crisis could not have come at a worse time, perhaps. Or maybe it could not have come at a better time, so that

we ask whose we are, and from whence our help really comes. Void of too much hyperbole, I want to name us as a congregation as a generous people who seek to live with a response ability to God and with many better angels in our hearts which call us to seek to live for the well-being of others. We have built a new building in order to teach children of all ages, to welcome new visitors into our fellowship, to provide a shelter for community groups to build up the welfare of each and of all. Our work is still developing. Mission, ministry with youth, learning, and continuing to have the weekly delight of meeting with God, singing praises and having God's revelation shared with us, is what the one God is doing among us, still. Let us seek that kingdom of God with mitzvah and misphat, and trust that all these other things will be ours, as well. Amen.