

ANOTHER WAY

Matthew 6: 25-33; Psalm 11: 33-40

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An interesting and yet sobering thing about retiring, as I did eight years ago is that it compels you to reflect about the course your life has taken. You ponder your victories and your defeats, encountered and experienced along life's way. As you recall your victories, you feel a deep satisfaction. As you recall your defeats and setbacks, your feelings are tinged with sadness and regret. Every reminder that you're growing older has its share of challenges, even humorous ones.

Tom, a good-natured friend of mine in Wilmington, was sitting recently on his porch with his four-year old granddaughter. She looked up at him and, in a sober and serious voice said, "Granddaddy, you know you're going to die soon." Of course, my friend was much taken aback, and he said to her, "Now, why would you say that, honey?" She said, "Granddaddy, your hair is gray and you have a lot of wrinkles." Tom laughed and, in an effort to be light-hearted, replied, "Well, I don't think I'm going to die anytime soon, but when I do, then I'll be an angel, sitting on a big white cloud, keeping watch over you." But his granddaughter only looked at him with more sadness and said, "Granddaddy, you can't be an angel." And Tom said, "why, honey, why can't I be an angel?" And she said, "Granddaddy, you can't be an angel because you're too old to grow wings and too big to fly."

So in these latter years, some reactions of the heart may be troubling, but they are both helpful and healthy, because this new chapter of life, like all new chapters, whether going into 10th grade, going away to college, turning thirty or forty or fifty, is a time to consider your life anew. Your victories and defeats give texture to your life experience, an accumulated wisdom which belongs uniquely to you. Yet even your best wisdom will not free you from struggle, that tossing and turning which seems to be woven into the fabric of life.

And if you're a person who, like me, does a lot of tossing and turning in life, you may find yourself at times bewildered by these wonderful teachings of Jesus. We've all read and pondered them, but don't we find them hard to believe? "Don't worry about your life," says Jesus, "what you will eat or what you will drink or about your body, what you will wear. Consider instead the birds of the air and the lilies of the field." If you're a tosser and turner, don't you find this hard to believe? Maybe especially when you're young, trying to impress others, proving yourself, making your way in life and listening to so many voices assuring you that this way or that way is the direction you should take and the way you should live.

I found it hard not to worry, hard to accept life as it unfolded, always trying to over-anticipate life and shape it to my own ends. I struggled with that. I had some breakthroughs along the way. I learned, by fits and starts, to trust God a bit more. Believe that I was not called to lead the way, carry the burden alone. We yearn to be convinced that this is true.

“Look around you,” Jesus tells the crowd. “Look at the birds of the air. They don’t sow or reap. They don’t gather and store their food in barns. But their heavenly Father feeds them.”

Yet, we confess, this is hard to believe. It’s hard to relax, hard to let go, hard to trust this Father who knows our needs before we do, who promises to give us what we need to live and grow and prosper.

Having so much to be responsible for in life, how can we be free of care, free of worry? There is so much we are expected to do. And there are some things we’re downright scared of, in what we know can be a dangerous world. How can we relax? Let down our guard?

What do we do? Well, for one, we have to keep turning with earnest prayer to this teaching, along with those others in Matthew Five, Six and Seven. The Sermon preached on the Mount. For Jesus is gently telling us there is another way. And way is a good word. Early Christians were known simply as People of the Way, and that captures very well what they understood as their new life in Christ.

I learned something recently about Dwight Eisenhower. A decade before Eisenhower was elected president, he was Supreme Commander, leading troops from the allied nations in the Second World War. He sometimes related an incident which became a formative part of his life. Here’s what happened.

Eisenhower grew up in a Quaker family in Abilene, Kansas. One Halloween night, when his two older brothers were leaving the house to trick or treat, he asked his father if he could go along. “No,” his father said, he was “too young to go trick or treating”. The young Eisenhower was not only disappointed, he was furious. He demanded that he be allowed to go and, when his father again refused, the boy threw a tantrum, standing in his front yard for nearly an hour, sobbing and crying and beating his fists against a tree until his hands were bleeding. Finally, his father came outside and took the boy to his room and closed the door and left him alone.

Sometime later in the evening, Eisenhower relates, his mother came into his room and took a towel and cleaned his bloody hands and bandaged them. Then, sitting down with her son, she paraphrased a verse from Proverbs: "He who conquereth his own soul is greater than he who taketh a city." Eisenhower reflected, "What my mother said that night changed my life." His mother's words became the foundation of Dwight Eisenhower's leadership abilities.

Eisenhower was never a great field officer, but as Supreme Commander he excelled. His quiet, low-key, self-confidence enabled him to create consensus and cooperation among the generals who served under him. Generals from his and other nations, some of whom were egotistical, cantankerous, publicity-seeking, more impressed with their reputation than doing what was needed to win the war. Some of these men saw Eisenhower as a rival and more than once challenged or insulted him.

By the strength of his personality, Eisenhower molded these officers into a team, mediated their disputes, kept them working together. Without Eisenhower's lifelong ability to keep his own counsel and restrain his anger and quietly, yet firmly, insist on compromise and cooperation, it is very likely that the western alliance would have fallen apart.

Eisenhower's contribution to victory was enormous, one that probably no one else, among the allies, could have made. And it rested very much on the lesson his mother taught him that night in Abilene, Kansas.

His mother offered her son another way. Eisenhower discovered another way to be himself, another way to live. For the young boy Eisenhower, like many of us, the easy and familiar, the most widely accepted way of life, is to put yourself in the forefront. To ask: What do I want? What can I accomplish? What can I control? In so many words, how can I have my way?

We too often approach life like the Eisenhower who was eight years old, not the Eisenhower who led the allied armies and later the country. Notice that Eisenhower's mother didn't lecture or scold, or tell her son what to do. She just sat down and shared a verse with him. And through her simple gesture, Eisenhower found another way.

Seeing the crowds, Matthew tells us, Jesus went up on the mountain and, when he sat down, the disciples came to him. Scholars tell us that what we call the Sermon on the Mount was probably a collection of teachings Jesus had shared at different times, but they reflect common themes and together describe another way of life. Certainly this passage about the birds of the air and lilies of the field stands apart as a word picture of the natural world and the unhampered relationship between Creator and created, a relationship, Jesus tells us, that God intends to have with us as well.

The passage is a simple and disarming depiction of life. The Heavenly Father feeds the birds, clothes the grass of the field; indeed the Father already knows what they need. If there is any lesson for you and I as listeners, it is to gracefully receive what the Father gives. We can rely, Jesus assures us, upon God to give what we need. We belong to him and we rest in his care. This is a simple and straightforward way to live.

Yet this simple depiction of life with God is deeply at odds with what we hanker for in life. The depiction is similar to the image we have of an earlier Garden in Eden. But, like Adam and Eve, we resist this understanding of life, this way of life. We resist embracing it.

Like Adam and Eve, we are severely conflicted and we resist this reliance upon God because there are so many other things we would prefer to rely upon. We resist the freedom and vulnerability of birds and flowers and find other ways to protect and fortify and embellish our living.

This resistance to God's love and God's good intention toward us is something we don't talk about very much, even in the church, but it is entrenched in our natures, plagues us, and operates in us continually. It's the resistance described in that elegant and mystical poem by Francis Thompson, "The Hound of Heaven." And we recall it vividly in Augustine's classic plea before God "to make me perfect, but not yet."

The wonderful scene of birds fed and flowers clothed, along with the promise that God will provide as much and even more for us, is appealing and attractive to our fondest imagination. Yet we turn away. We resist and rebel and run from it.

But here's the thing. Christ is true to what Christ describes and he keeps on anyway, keeps on providing us with good gifts, keeps on pursuing us. And occasionally, in ways that are never entirely clear to you and me, he takes hold of us, and we receive his gift and recognize that it's him and we call what we experience by its proper name. We call it grace. And grace is precisely what it is. And it is this grace, and this grace only, which enables us to follow, if only by fits and starts, another way of life. The more we do this, the more we grow in his likeness. And the more this happens, the more we grasp, the more we understand how this friendship with Christ really works. And we call this sanctifying grace.

Another way of life is described more fully in the remaining portion of the Sermon on the Mount, and I hope you will read it again in the coming week. It's all about making a place for vulnerability in your life. Like meekness and mourning, hungering and thirsting, trusting and rejoicing. All about giving light to the world and showing mercy, turning your check and loving enemies, all about searching and finding, praying and peacemaking.

All about impossible things. But not impossible for Christ. And not impossible for those whom Christ calls and Christ enables, by grace alone, to live another way.

So live another way and see what happens.

One day, consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, how they utterly rely upon God's goodness. Consider that for one day, hold it close for one day, and see what happens. And every day pray a simple prayer. "Christ what are you seeking to accomplish in me?" And keep your ears open and listen. And keep your eyes open and watch and wait and see what happens.

The way is there, but it is a way that does not occur to us, does not come naturally to us, and only the Messiah can provide another way. Another way is not one that we find or follow on our own. And living another way is never our gift to Christ, but always his gift to us.

Amen.

