

Lessons:

Matthew 6:24-34

There's this computer guy named Hal Steger. -- He's 51 years old. -- He's got two kids, and a wife who also works.

Hal calls himself a computer geek -- and he's used his mind and skills to put \$2 million in the bank -- and totally pay off his \$1.3 million, ocean front home. -- All tolled, Hal Steger is worth \$3.5 million.

That puts him in the top 2% of families in the U.S. -- And in the top .001% of families in the world.

Yet most every day, Hal is at his desk by 7 am. -- He puts in 12 hours a day -- and on weekends he puts in another 10 hours from home.

Why? -- You see, Hal does not consider himself 'rich.' -- Hal's problem is that he lives in Silicon Valley.

As you and I know -- these days, that area is awash in multi-millionaires -- so much so that Hal says this:

"I know people looking in from the outside will ask why someone like me keeps working so hard -- "but a few million bucks doesn't go as far as it used to."

Surrounded by thousands of other 'single digit millionaires' -- Hal is anxious about his financial future -- He is worried about health care costs, retirement, and his children's education.

A Silicon Valley therapist says this:

"People around here, if they have 2 or 3 million dollars, don't feel secure.

"We're in such a rarified environment, people here lose perspective on what the rest of the world looks like."

Already perched so high on the financial ladder of success -- Hal's problem, and the problem so many of his friends face -- is that it's hard to look down, at the rest of the world -- when everyone around them is looking in the opposite direction.

Gary Cremen is the 43 year old founder of an online dating website called "Match.com" -- he lives in Silicon Valley too -- and he says this: "Everyone around here looks at the people above them." -- Gary is worth \$10 million.

But he feels intimidated and outclassed when he goes out for dinner at some of the area hot spots.

While sipping a glass of pinot noir at an upscale wine bar, he earnestly told a reporter -- "You're nobody here at \$10 million."

You're nobody at \$10 million... What would make somebody say this?

“God and Money”

Proper 3, RCL-A, Sunday, May 25, 2008

What would make somebody, as bright as Gary Cremen, actually believe this?

Easy.

We all know the answer: Money.

It's money. -- It's the power of money to adjust our thinking processes, our behavior patterns -- to change our entire outlook on the world.

The power that money has over our lives is absolutely enormous.

Most of us aren't even in touch with the depths of its influence in our lives -- Most of us are not aware of how much “money” dictates what we do and how we see ourselves.

“No one can serve two masters...

“You cannot serve God and wealth.” -- God and money. -- Of all the things that Jesus elevates to God's level.

Jesus does not say:

“You cannot serve God and family
...or God and nobility
...or God and knowledge
...or God and reputation
...You cannot serve God and money.

Only money is put on par with God.

That's why money was Jesus' number one preaching topic -- next to the kingdom of God.

The Bible makes 2,000 references to money -- it only makes 500 references to prayer.
(The Money Book, Dennis Maynard)

Money.

It's the world's number one temptation -- it is probably yours and mine.

On our bulletin cover, George Frederick Watts gives money a human form.

St. David's, meet 'Mammon,' the god of money. -- Look, he's a tyrant on a throne -- he nurses money bags in his lap -- and crushes two unsuspecting young people with his monstrous power.

And we get a kick out of this painting's politically incorrect title:

“Dedicated to his worshippers.’

Money.

Perhaps we don't like to talk about it because it's so hard to admit its power in our lives

If we're honest with ourselves, we admit that we Christians allow money, not God, to measure success and failure in almost every important endeavor of our lives.

We allow money to give us our identity -- instead of allowing God to define our identity.

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Think of how much more we expect fulfillment to come in our lives from our financial success -- versus fulfillment to come in our lives based on our relationship with God.

Take away the food, clothing, cars, the heat, the air conditioning, the modern conveniences, the health, the wealth -- and how many of us would not cry foul, just like Job -- and see our lives as pointless and meaningless and unfulfilled and utterly unsuccessful?

How many of us would be strong enough to love and serve God even if all of our resources were taken from us -- don't worry there will be no show of hands.

Now to be honest, we spend 80% of our waking hours earning, spending, or thinking about money.

Of course this is going to affect our spirituality.

And what Jesus is trying to get to here, is a healthy way for you and me to deal with this thorny issue.

It is not surprising that Jesus chooses to follow up this harsh reality -- of service to God or money -- with one of the most beautifully poetic passages in the entire Bible.

It is the climax of the Sermon on the Mount -- It's so graceful that some of us have parts of it memorized -- "Consider the lilies..."

Emily Dickinson once wrote that it was the only commandment in the Bible she never broke -- would that we keep it as well...

This passage is a gracious manifesto in how to re-adjust our attitudes, keep things in perspective, and remind ourselves of the point of view that we so desperately desire to cultivate in our lives -- none of us want to be so focused on money that we lose perspective on the rest of life.

We want God's point of view, not our own -- so how do we get it?...

Let's look at the text:

'Therefore I tell you do not worry about your life... what you will eat, drink or wear -
- is not life more than food and clothing?'

In this verse Jesus challenges us to think about life's biggest question?

What's it all about.... Alfie?

If life is not about food, clothing, possessions, and experiences, then what it is all about?

We look at Jesus' life and it tells us: -- What was Jesus' life all about?

Giving

This continues to be the basis for the happiest lives out there.

The fulfilled life is all about giving.

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It may not be as severe as facing the whipping post or hanging on a cross -- but it's about those times when we put others ahead of ourselves.

In fact, few of us here have stories about our most fulfilling experiences in life that DON'T have anything to do with giving.

Those of us who have raised kids, helped siblings, cared for aging parents, looked after our neighbors -- we know that life is really not all about food and clothing.

But just in case we fall into that bad habit and start to believe that it might be, Jesus has us do something rather bizarre.

“Look at the birds of the air...” And “Consider the lilies...”

Our Lord asks us to pay attention to the Creation that surrounds us.

And I think we know why.

Has any of us who have gone on a long walk, taken to the golf course, or gone camping to help us deal with undue anxiety know.

We understand the serenity of hiking a lonely trail -- the peace we get when we gaze upon the beauty of a rolling landscape -- even the solemnity we feel of tending to a window flower box.

I simply like putting the top down on my car and feeling the wind at my back.

As Gerard Manley Hopkins put it:

“The world is charged with the grandeur of God.”

“When Jesus points us toward the birds of the air or the lilies of the field -- he is not trying to get our minds off of our worries;

“He is pointing us to a way of discerning the larger purposes of God.” (Tom McGrath, The Christian Century, 5-20-08)

And we see that there is a danger at over-simplification here...

We don't want to misunderstand Jesus -- as if he's saying be like birds and flowers because they're clueless...

What's that bumper sticker say?:

“If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs-
“you clearly don't comprehend the situation.”

This is not what's going on with the birds and the flowers here.

Instead, Jesus points to nature as an example of how each part unselfishly and unselfconsciously participates in the life of God.

Right now, God is endlessly pouring forth creative energy and life that is permeating all of Creation.

It comes from the birds and the flowers and the trees and the skies -- And we're supposed to participate in life in the same way -- as channels of God's love and boundless care.

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When we spend all day worrying, it blocks that participation -- which is why we humans often feel distant and disconnected from God. (McGrath)

“Fear closes our hearts -- and worry puts up a barricade to grace.

The birds and the lilies and all of nature teach us lessons about being unobstructed channels for the free and open flow of God’s grace.

Some of us sports fans may remember a baseball player named Jim Bouton.

A few decades ago he wrote about life as a major league pitcher in a somewhat famous book called “Ball Four.”

As he reflected back on his many years in baseball he made this startling observation.

“You spend a good deal of your life gripping a baseball – “and in the end, it turns out that, the whole time, it was the other way around.”

My friends -- What is gripping us this morning?

What is it that we are gripping – that we just can’t let go of... and we find that it’s gripping us?

How might we get loose?

In 2002 pop singer Sheryl Crow released an updated translation of this morning’s passage -- in the form of a hit song called “I want to soak up the sun”

Instead of lilies of the field, the music video shows palm trees. -- Instead of birds of the air, there are surfers...

And Sheryl Crow gives this carefree advice about focus and perspective on our acquisitive lives.

She says:

“It’s not getting what you want -- it’s wanting what you’ve got.”

This is the point that Jesus is making in this text.

Release from the grip of the Kingdom of Man, and embrace of the Kingdom of God comes when we consider the lilies -- when we go against the grain and look down the ladder instead of up it.

Let’s try this-

Close your eyes for a moment if you wish and in our minds, let’s look down the ladder.

Let’s consider the great things happening below...

First, let’s think about the family and friends who are closest to us -- and surround us with love and care.

Of course, they’re not perfect -- and we may be in serious conflict in some areas -- But what relationships can we give thanks for this morning?

Who are we really happy about?

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Let's think about a measure of health that we have that makes it possible to enjoy life.

Sure, we're tempted to think about 'what we used to be able to do' -- and some of us are facing some pretty serious health challenges -- but think about what we can do -- our eyesight, our hearing, our sense of touch, and ability to perceive beauty.

What is there about our health that we can give thanks for this morning?

Next, let's think about our church community -- Of course we're not perfect. -- But it's a place where we're able to find strength to continue in this life.

We think about our friends here -- how Jesus meets us here in Word and Sacrament.

What can we be thankful for regarding each other and the Christ who brings us together?

Next, how about thanks for the abundance of food and drink we have to stave off hunger and thirst. -- What's in our refrigerators or pantries that we're thankful for?

Finally, is there anything we can think of that makes us thankful to live in this country?

Sure, our reputation in the world has been better in years past...

But as we approach this Memorial Day weekend, what is there about liberty, stability, security, that we can be thankful for?

Especially about the veterans we'll honor on Monday?

Now as we open our eyes -- I am sure we could think of many more things to add to this list.

But hopefully we're a little more conscious of the ladder that we're all on -- And it's so hard to look down -- to be counter-cultural, and look to God for fulfillment when the rest of the world looks elsewhere.

That's why what we're about to do next is so crucial.

Bishop Vogel put it this way:

We don't make Eucharist to escape the world's problems -- We make Eucharist to escape the world's answers.

Amen.