

Monday, April 22

Money on the Mount – fourth reading

Today's Scripture reading: Matthew 6.19-34 (MSG)

READ & REFLECT

Here we are one more time, back at home base. Back to this money on the mount bit. Time once again to clear our heads, re-adjust our lenses, and focus our vision for the week.

Hear it fresh.

Don't fight it.

Let it in.

Let it reshape, remold, recast you...

Don't hoard treasure down here

where it gets eaten by moths and corroded by rust or—worse!—stolen by burglars.

Stockpile treasure in heaven, where it's safe from moth and rust and burglars.

It's obvious, isn't it?

The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being.

Your eyes are windows into your body.

If you open your eyes wide in wonder and belief, your body fills up with light.

If you live squinty-eyed in greed and distrust, your body is a musty cellar.

If you pull the blinds on your windows, what a dark life you will have!

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.

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.

Look 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.

Has anyone by fussing in front of the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch?

All 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, but have you ever seen color and design quite like it?
The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them.

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?

What 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.

People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things,
but you know both God and how he works.

Steep 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.

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.

RELATE

So, as we pause for a moment of personal reflection and prayer, ponder:
What stands out to you in this fourth reading of "money on the mount"?
What comforts you? What stretches you? What seems beyond reach for you?

PRAY

Lord, you are my provider, my daily bread.

Help me to recognize your good gifts from above. Empower me to make choices that line up with
your heart. Help me to be content with what you've given me.

Guide my steps and decisions, for they impact more than just me.

Give me wisdom and discipline to use your resources well, to build your kingdom on earth as it is
in Heaven. Forgive my shortcomings, my unbelief, and my selfishness. Let me steward all that you
give me well for the benefit of others and future generations.

Thank you for your continued faithfulness.

For you are my provider, and I trust in you.

Amen

Tuesday, April 23

Foodies and Fashionistas

Today's Scripture reading: Matthew 6.25 (MSG)

READ

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.

This is God's Word

REFLECT

“There's far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach or the clothes you hang on your body” – and we can audibly hear the groans of every foodie and fashionista in the room.

Far more than food?
Far more than clothing?

Ironically, I just got up to grab a protein bar after typing that last line.
Then I Googled.

The gross domestic product (GDP) of the food industry in our culture alone is 1.5 trillion dollars annually. According to one source, “The US restaurant industry boasts an impressive annual revenue, hitting \$975.92 billion in 2022, emphasizing its massive scale.”

That's a lot of burgers.

Indications point to continued revenue growth in the restaurant industry – though around 60% of restaurants fail within the first year, and 80% close their doors within five years with restaurants overall having an average lifespan of 3.5 years. But no worries. We'll make more.

And the fashion industry?

“Its value is equivalent to 3 trillion dollars. That means, it corresponds to 2% of the world's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The Joint Economic Committee of The United States released a survey in 2019 affirming that, only in the US, consumers spent nearly \$380 billion on apparel and footwear.”

That's a lot of Birkenstocks.

To put our food and fashion industries in perspective, projected defense spending for this year is put at \$842 billion, and, at least in 2022, individual contributions on record for charities rang in at just over \$319 billion with corporations kicking in another \$180 billion.

This really isn't a guilt trip.

I love burgers (too much) and Birkenstocks aren't bad either.

But like cold water splashed on our face first thing in the morning,
facts can help bring needed focus.

It's so easy to pay lip service to Jesus' words while living in blatant non-compliance with them
when the rubber – and the Birkenstocks – hits the road.

Is life really more than the food we put into our mouths and more than the fashions we hang on
ourselves like living, breathing, walking mannequins?

If so, then what is that more?

And what are we pouring of ourselves and our resources into it?

RELATE

So, as we pause for a moment of personal reflection and prayer, ponder:

So how about it – Is life really more than the food we put into our mouths and more than the
fashions we hang on ourselves like living, breathing, walking mannequins?

If so, then what is that more?

And what are we pouring of ourselves and our resources into it?

PRAY

Lord, you are my provider, my daily bread.

Help me to recognize your good gifts from above. Empower me to make choices that line up with
your heart. Help me to be content with what you've given me.

Guide my steps and decisions, for they impact more than just me.

Give me wisdom and discipline to use your resources well, to build your kingdom on earth as it is
in Heaven. Forgive my shortcomings, my unbelief, and my selfishness. Let me steward all that you
give me well for the benefit of others and future generations.

Thank you for your continued faithfulness.

For you are my provider, and I trust in you.

Amen

Wednesday, April 24

Look at the birds, free and unfettered

Today's Scripture reading: Matthew 6.26 (MSG)

READ

Look 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.

This is God's Word

REFLECT

Time for another St. Francis story, one for which he is perhaps most remembered and one frequently commemorated in statues and art: Francis and the birds. He preached to the birds on more than one occasion, urging them to be just what they are: precious creatures under the care of a loving creator and that they need aspire to no more than that. And on at least one occasion, he sang with them, as narrated by St. Bonaventure:

One time when Francis was walking with another friar in the Venetian marshes, they came upon a huge flock of birds, singing among the reeds.

When he saw them, the saint said to his companion, "Our sisters the birds are praising their Creator. We will go among them and sing God's praise, chanting the divine office."

They went in among the birds, which remained where they were, making so much noise that the friars could not hear themselves saying the office. Eventually the saint turned to them and said, "My sisters, stop singing until we have given God the praise to which he has a right." The birds were immediately silent and remained that way until Francis gave them permission to sing again, after the men had taken plenty of time to say the office and had finished their praises.

Then the birds began to sing again, as usual.

Of course, the birds were just one point of connection for Francis. His entire life became interwoven with the world in which he walked and lived and breathed, as observed by biographer Mirabai Starr:

Saint Francis not only established deep bonds of friendship with animals, he slowed down enough to notice how they live, how they respond to challenges, how they "praise the Lord, each in its own unique way."

It was in the natural world that Francis most clearly beheld the face of the Divine. It is not that he saw nature as God, but that all of creation reflected the radiance of the Creator. In both the complexity and the simplicity of nature, Francis perceived the interconnectedness of all life and knew it to be unutterably sacred.

Where do you go to find the clues about who you really are?

To the pages of the established canon or to the wilderness?
When the storms of your life are breaking all your windows,
does it occur to you to run out into the rain and let it wash away your opinions on the matter?

Sometimes the only way to make a decision is to yield.

Look to nature.

Pay attention to the behavior of water as it meets and flows around a boulder in the stream.

Watch the way birds find tiny seeds in the snow.

Observe the changing colors on the horizon as the longest night of your life gives rise,
at last and inevitably, to a new day.

What I find most striking about St Francis on so many levels is how very seriously he took whatever Jesus says.

“Go out! Go to the birds! Watch them carefully. Study them.”

And while we can sit unmoved in a library cubicle or within enclosed sanctuary walls that afford no view of the outside world through potentially distracting windows, Francis actually got up and went and looked and watched and studied them. And he even sang with them.

Imagine that.

Imagine hearing these words read within the confines of the sanctuary and the entire congregation getting up and doing just what Jesus said to do and taking an on-the-spot field trip. Of course, Jesus’ original audience for the Sermon didn’t have to get up and go anywhere – they were already there – in fact, no doubt Jesus was already pointing to the birds chirping and hopping about among them.

Worried about your finances?

Worried about where your next meal is coming from?

Worried about what you will eat and how you will survive in your retirement years?

Talk a walk.

Go on a field trip.

And look at the birds of the air...

RELATE

So, as we pause for a moment of personal reflection and prayer, ponder:

When’s the last time you just went outside and watched the birds? How might this work as a prescription for worry over finances the next time you’re paying the bills?

PRAY

Lord, you are my provider, my daily bread.

Help me to recognize your good gifts from above. Empower me to make choices that line up with your heart. Help me to be content with what you’ve given me.

Guide my steps and decisions, for they impact more than just me.

Give me wisdom and discipline to use your resources well, to build your kingdom on earth as it is in Heaven. Forgive my shortcomings, my unbelief, and my selfishness. Let me steward all that you give me well for the benefit of others and future generations.

Thank you for your continued faithfulness.

For you are my provider, and I trust in you. Amen

Thursday, April 25

Fussing in the mirror

Today's Scripture reading: Matthew 6.27 (MSG)

READ

Has anyone by fussing in front of the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch?

This is God's Word

REFLECT

I initially thought I would just lump this into the next section of Jesus' "money on the mount" bit dealing with clothing, style, and fashion – but then I thought better of it.

This is another Jesus one liner
and we need to let it stand on its own.

So here we go.

"Has anyone by fussing in front of the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch?"

Let's begin by looking at the end of this one: "so much as an inch."

The Message rendering is "gotten taller by an inch."

The more literal King James reads "add one cubit unto his stature."

More recent versions like the NIV and ESV render it "add a single hour to your life," while the NLT has "add a single moment to your life" shifting from physical to temporal measurements.

But it's *pay-coon hen-nah* in the Greek and *ee-mah ah-tah* in the Hebrew – and (for good measure) *ad staturam suam cubitum unum* in the Latin.

The Greek *pay-coos* = the Hebrew *ee-mah* = the Latin *cubitum* aka our English cubit.

And a cubit is eighteen inches – roughly the distance between one's elbow and tip of your longest finger (a "royal cubit" is the distance on the arm of the monarch).

Which has always been striking to me – that Jesus says *pay-coos/ee-mah/cubitum* aka 18 inches rather than a smaller, more doable measurement – to which our modern translations default.

Here's the thing. Jesus had a range of measurements from which to choose:

There was the *tefach* which was the width of the palm or handbreadth;

There was the *ezba'ot* which was the width of four fingers (on my royal hand that's 3 inches);

There was the *ezba* which was the width of one finger (on my royal finger that's 3/4 of an inch);

Then there was the *zeret* or span which was the width of your hand with fingers spread wide – which is said to be nine inches (though I just measured mine and it's only eight; I feel so very inadequate);

And then there is the cubit which is also two spans and amounts to about 18 inches.

So why didn't Jesus say you couldn't even add an *ezba* to your height – not even one finger-width? As a tradesman builder (Greek *tehton*) he would have well known and used all these measurements, so why does he jump from the finger width *ezba* past the four-finger width *ezba'ot*, past the *zeret*/span, all the way to the *eemah*/cubit?

Could it perhaps be that in worrying ourselves before the mirror of how we perceive ourselves and even more importantly how others see us – we’re not worrying ourselves into slight, incremental changes compensating for perceived inadequacies and shortcomings but rather on sweeping makeover-level changes in external features that have the potential to elevate us from a lowly (literally, physically) peasant to towering nobility like Saul of old who stood head and shoulders (aka a good royal cubit) taller than the rest of his generation?

Who says “keeping up with the Joneses” was a modern fixation?

And why do those stinking Joneses have to be so stinking tall?

And impressive.

And smart.

And savvy and hip and “in” and so “all that.”

How these comparison games not only drive us crazy – how they drive us and our money and our time and our resources, all for the sake of making that big splash like suddenly showing up just as tall as everyone else in the room (while you nervously hope no one notices that set of pumps propping you up).

Today’s Jesus’ one-liner lies as the axe at the root of the tree of our fidgeting and fussing and all the expense and sweat and time and effort that goes into it as we measure ourselves in the mirror of other’s expectations.

Be as done with it as was Paul, who said “imitate me, as I imitate Christ,” as he made his own explicit pronouncement against the comparison game we all too easily get sucked into:

We dare not make ourselves of the number,
or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves:
but they measuring themselves by themselves,
and comparing themselves among themselves,
are not wise.

Selah.

RELATE

So, as we pause for a moment of personal reflection and prayer, ponder:

How often do you find yourself fussing and fidgeting before the mirror of others’ expectations?

How do we absorb the truth that “by the grace of God I am what I am” without apology and without shame?

PRAY

Lord, you are my provider, my daily bread.

Help me to recognize your good gifts from above. Empower me to make choices that line up with your heart. Help me to be content with what you’ve given me.

Guide my steps and decisions, for they impact more than just me.

Give me wisdom and discipline to use your resources well, to build your kingdom on earth as it is in Heaven. Forgive my shortcomings, my unbelief, and my selfishness. Let me steward all that you give me well for the benefit of others and future generations.

Thank you for your continued faithfulness.

For you are my provider, and I trust in you. Amen

Friday, April 26

Why don't you take a hike?

Today's Scripture reading: Matthew 6.28-30 (MSG slightly adapted)

READ

All 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,
but have you ever seen color and design quite like it?
The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them.

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,
O ye of such wee faith?

This is God's Word

REFLECT

“The miracle is not to walk on water but to walk on the earth.”
I believe it's the Vietnamese peace activist and monk Thich Nhat Hanh that said that.

And I hear Jesus saying, “Amen.”

As he urges us to turn away from the obsessive inward focused and other's approval obsessed mirror, Jesus tells us to do something radical.

He tells us to go take a hike.

Once again, I'm waiting for the windowless sanctuary to suddenly empty as these words are spoken and all the Jesus students, unbidden by further human prompting, promptly get up, exit the building, and go take a hike in search of wildflowers to observe. This his original students didn't have to do. They had already hiked up the mountain with him. But students within our more enclosed sanctuary space will literally need to do this – that is, if, like Francis we were to take Jesus a bit more seriously and literally do what he says.

This is what Barbara Brown Taylor challenges us to do in her book *An Altar in the World*, which is her book exploring, shall we say, less traditional spiritual practices...like taking a walk...

Sometimes we do not know what we know until it comes to us
through the soles of our feet,
the embrace of a tender lover,
or the kindness of a stranger.

Touching the truth with our minds alone is not enough.
We are made to touch it with our bodies.

I think this is why Christian tradition clings to the reality of resurrection, even when no one can explain it to anyone else's satisfaction. The immortality of the soul is much easier to conceive than the resurrection of the body. What? *You mean a stopped heart suddenly starts again? You mean a dead body gets up with a growling stomach?* No, I mean God loves bodies. I mean that in some way that defies all understanding, God means to welcome risen bodies and not just disembodied souls to heaven's banquet table.

The resurrection of the dead is the radical insistence that matter matters to God.

Still, there is no sense spending much time on that when most people do not even know how to walk.

I have watched people walk, so I know.

People walk with cell phones pressed to their ears, so that they cannot hear the mockingbird doing imitations of a postal truck backing up. Some people walk in pointed shoes so painful that they wince with every step, while others wear shoes so padded out with cushions, lights, and retractable wheels that they are walking on their shoes, not the earth.

Among the hardest walkers for me to watch are small children being hauled along by their wrists. Parents tell me that this is sometimes necessary, but since I have never been a parent I would not know. I do know that most of the adults doing the hauling do not mean to be unkind. They are simply used to walking, while the child is not. The child has only recently learned how to walk, so she still knows how.

She feels the heat radiating up from the sidewalk.

She hears the tapping of her shoes on the cement.

She sees the dime someone has dropped in the crosswalk,
which she leans toward before being yanked upright again.

The child is so exposed to the earth that even an acorn underfoot would topple her, which may be why her adult is hanging on so tightly.

But the speed is too much for her.

Her arm is stretched so far it hurts.

She has to run where her adult walks,

and if that adult is talking on a cell phone, then really, she might be better off in jail.

Go witness a miracle: Go take a hike. Go walk on the earth. Minus the cell phone pressed to your ear, and minus dragging the toddler within at a speed far too great for her. And find a wildflower...

RELATE

So, as we pause for a moment of personal reflection and prayer, ponder:

When's the last time you really took a walk – and stopped to smell the actual roses?

PRAY

Lord, you are my provider, my daily bread.

Help me to recognize your good gifts from above. Empower me to make choices that line up with your heart. Help me to be content with what you've given me.

Guide my steps and decisions, for they impact more than just me.

Give me wisdom and discipline to use your resources well, to build your kingdom on earth as it is in Heaven. Forgive my shortcomings, my unbelief, and my selfishness. Let me steward all that you give me well for the benefit of others and future generations.

Thank you for your continued faithfulness.

For you are my provider, and I trust in you.

Amen

Saturday, April 27

Steep your life in God-reality

Today's Scripture reading: Matthew 6.31-34 (MSG)

READ

What 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.

People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things,
but you know both God and how he works.

Steep 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.

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.

This is God's Word

REFLECT

Here we come to it. Here's the point of it all – all the birds, the ditching of the mirror, the pausing over wildflowers as we go take a hike.

Steep yourself in God-reality. Immerse yourself in God-initiative. Lose yourself in God-provision.

And then watch worry about missing out or measuring up evaporate like the morning mist.
Watch preoccupation with what may or may not happen tomorrow fade into irrelevance as you find yourself lost in the marvel and mess of the moment before you – because all of our moments through all our days are generally made up of generous measures of each.

This was actually my first public sermon ever. At age sixteen. And this was my text – this whole “money on the mount” bit in Matthew 6.19-34 we've been dallying our way through for the past four weeks. I was sure that sermon would take me at least a solid forty-five minutes to preach at that midweek gathering on that Wednesday night at the Sepulveda Church of Christ on Haskell Street. Maybe a full hour. I'm glad I didn't warn them about going over as I started – because I was done in all of seven minutes. Seven minutes. Now I can fill 28 days of devotions clocking in at somewhere around a total of 196 minutes, seven minutes at a time, as I've gone from seven minutes to nearly three and a quarter hours.

It's not just that I'm loquacious or talkative – though no doubt you've noticed I certainly can be. It's that I could only speak for seven minutes – the equivalent duration of one day of these devotions – based on one year's experience of knowing Jesus as a teen. But now I can write and speak based on nearly five decades of it. That's why Timothy Keller would urge pastors wanting to write to generally wait until they are at least fifty-five or so.

It's good to give yourself time to learn what you're actually talking about.
And hopefully more effective ways of saying it.

And here's the thing. My dad was a very practical, worldly wise and savvy certified public accountant who served as the CFO for a string of grocery stores in the San Fernando Valley. My brother and I had been living with him for two years in the wake of my mother's death – she very religious, he very much not so. And what did his CFO/certified public accountant's eyes spy on his sixteen-year-old son's desk? Sermon notes on Matthew 6.19-34 with “don't worry about your life” and “look at the birds of the air” and “behold the flowers of the field” and “don't worry about tomorrow because tomorrow will worry about itself.”

I honestly believe graphic porn or drug paraphernalia would have been less upsetting.

He actually waited up to confront me about those notes one night when I came home from what no doubt was a Bible study (#dadsnotafan). The gist of his feedback to me: “you're an idiot.” Moreover, anyone is an idiot who really believes this nonsense. This is *not* how the world works. Birds and flowers. This is *not* how you're going to succeed in life.

In his defense, please remember that this was 1976 and the hippie movement was still very much a thing. And, honestly, he was actually right about so much of what he was saying to me – then and later. I, of course, as any red-blooded, normal sixteen-year-old male didn't have ears to hear any of it – nor the humility to recognize that I really didn't know *yet* what I was talking about. I hadn't yet been inside the words. I had never worked, had never paid any bills, maintained a home, and dealt with the unpredictable flow of life when it came to responsibilities and money and saving and spending and investing. Five decades later, I do. Much. And now I've been inside the words, and they've been inside me. Now I think we would have a much more interesting conversation – starting with my apology for being an idiot – and I suspect that one day we will (he died of lung cancer in December of 1984). My point is that being steeped in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions isn't the naïve sentimental musings of a teen who's never really done life yet. This *is*, in fact, *the way the world works* and is set forth by the One who authored and holds that world together.

And you can take *that* to the bank.

RELATE

So, as we pause for a moment of personal reflection and prayer, ponder:

To what extent would you say that your life is “steeped in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions”? What might this look like for you as you navigate the challenge of money in the wide world?

PRAY

Lord, you are my provider, my daily bread.

Help me to recognize your good gifts from above. Empower me to make choices that line up with your heart. Help me to be content with what you've given me.

Guide my steps and decisions, for they impact more than just me.

Give me wisdom and discipline to use your resources well, to build your kingdom on earth as it is in Heaven. Forgive my shortcomings, my unbelief, and my selfishness. Let me steward all that you give me well for the benefit of others and future generations.

Thank you for your continued faithfulness.

For you are my provider, and I trust in you.

Amen

Sunday, April 28

Teaching story: A rich fool and a trusting widow

Our fourth and final teaching story of Jesus is actually something of a two-parter; the first a story told and the second a story witnessed. The story told is the story of the rich fool – a story told in response to a demand from someone in the listening crowd for Jesus to don the judge’s robe and settle a family financial dispute, hence it is a story born in heated conflict; the story witnessed is that of the destitute but trusting widow who had nothing but gave it all.

Let the stories speak:

Someone out of the crowd said,
“Teacher, order my brother to give me a fair share of the family inheritance.”

He replied,
“Buster, what makes you think it’s any of my business to be a judge or mediator for you?”

Then speaking to all the people, he went on,

Take care!
Protect yourself against the least bit of greed!
Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot.

Then he told them this story:

The farm of a certain rich man produced a terrific crop.
He talked to himself: ‘What can I do? My barn isn’t big enough for this harvest.’
Then he said,
‘Here’s what I’ll do: I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones.
Then I’ll gather in all my grain and goods, and I’ll say to myself,
Self, you’ve done well! You’ve got it made and can now retire.
Take it easy and have the time of your life!’

Just then God showed up and said,
‘Fool! Tonight you die. And your barnful of goods—who gets it?’

That’s what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God. (Luke 12.13-21)

* * *

Just then he looked up and saw the rich people dropping offerings in the treasury box.

Then he saw a poor widow put in two puny pennies.

He said,
The plain truth is that this widow has given by far the largest offering today.
All these others made offerings that they’ll never miss;
she gave extravagantly what she couldn’t afford—
she gave her all!

(Luke 21.1-4)

What lessons do you see on display in these contrasting stories?

What is the Spirit nudging you to do in response – not just to these two stories – but in response to these past four weeks of teaching and contemplation?

What are you prepared to do?