



“God of the Details”

a sermon by

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Our scripture lesson for the afternoon comes from Luke 12:22-34. As we have said before, listen for God's word afresh in a familiar text- Hear the Word of the Lord: Jesus said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you- you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailling treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. This is the Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God.

There seems to be an awful lot of talk about details these days: Getting lost in the details, details piling up, trying to pull the details together. Detailed budgets to review, Details to overlook, details to trip you up, details to plan if you want to take a trip. In our Food for Thought series Dr. Richard Blackwell is offering us a section titled "Don't sweat the small stuff- and its all small stuff". I myself didn't realize how caught up in this small stuff I was until this week, when our brand new computer at home got sick with a virus and crashed- causing me to lose track of many details of my life and work thus promoting a certain degree of anxiety. I saw someone just the other day contending with too many details at once- she cut me off on I-77, practically relegating me to the shoulder of the highway. It doesn't seem to be enough that I fret over my own details, but now must concern myself with someone else being overwhelmed with their details, with consequences as far reaching as the questioning of my own vocation in the ministry as the only response I could think of to this poor woman's anxiety-filled life in that moment was, I'll admit, less than pastoral. It has been one of those weeks where I feel I am preoccupied by so many details that I lose sight of the big picture, even- it is like standing too close to a pointillist painting- you see only thousands of dots, but it is when you take a few steps back that they will start to come together and the larger picture will slowly emerge, often revealing startling simplicity. A beautiful whole made up of complex parts, but stand to close and it seems like nonsense. I recently came across of a copy of the Cherokee Advance- a newsletter of sorts from the area I grew up in in what was once rural Georgia that was published in 1880. Talk about a different time. Allow me to share just a few of the newsworthy events of the day with you:

"Maj. Petty has for sixty years had a briar in his finger. No effort of a surgeon to remove it has proven successful." "Mr. Thacker caught a large beaver in a trap last week.

It is the fourth one for him in four weeks.” “A wheezing disease is prevailing among the hogs.” “In the language of the spring poets, “all is calm and serene.” “Webb and Worley speak of erecting a new store house at Hickory Flat. They are businessmen, and, by the way, right good looking men too.” I was surprised by my own reaction to these articles- I felt an unexpected mixture of amusement and cynicism- almost a resentment over the seeming simplicity of these times- though I know they were fraught with their own trials. Perhaps this resentment is a symptom of the disease CNN Money.com calls “influenza”- defined as the sickness of being focused on buying things, working too much (but still not having enough money), and stressing about it all.” Clearly this new inundation of and preoccupation with the details and the frenzy of it all these days calls for a scripture check. I used to think our passage today from the gospel of Luke was intended only for stewardship or mission Sundays, or perhaps was written with my own mother’s purposes for the text in mind, who knew that there was scriptural justification for why, when I was growing up, I was allowed to shop only at the thrift store rather than the Gap.

This passage does have great value for the preacher and for the listener on many levels- in it we find a remarkable affirmation of God’s provision, release from earthly pressures to conform, following the parable of the fool who hoards his treasure for himself in huge barns, there is a proclamation of the importance of being free of material trappings, and a commission to give up excess and to help the poor. And for us here today, meditating on working with a faith afloat on a sea of seemingly endless details, regardless of our vocation, Jesus offers a word on a different kind of stewardship as well- a stewardship for ourselves, a stewardship of our spirits. “And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” It is not the seeking that is the issue for Jesus, it is the anxiety. For Jesus, anxiety is a spiritual condition- perhaps more accurately, a spiritual malady. It is in anxiety that we keep our eyes down and our backs bent to the details- it is in preoccupation with the details that we forget the spiritual work at hand, it is in our anxiety that we step too close to that painting straining to see every detail and miss our part in the larger composition of the work of the kingdom at hand. As one commentator reminds us, faith awakens us to the spiritual dimensions of life, faith forces a new perspective on life. And this perspective is not one that is confounded in the details of our toil, but trusts that the work of God is alive and well in the very details that threaten to overwhelm. Do not keep worrying- your father knows what you need- strive for the kingdom, and your needs will be met, all will be given to you and much, much more. Henry David Thoreau writes, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” “They are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal... This world is a place of business. What infinite bustle! I am awakened almost every night by the panting of the locomotive. It interrupts my dreams. There is no Sabbath. It would be glorious to see mankind at leisure for once.”

Christ’s Word of hope is one of stewardship of our emotions, our energies, our very spirits. We don’t have to sweat the small stuff, for God of eternal life is also God of

the details so that we might be freed up to channel our energies to making strides towards the kingdom. So what does this mean, 'striving toward the kingdom'? Well, our discussion of sanctuary last week gives us a good clue. Work of the kingdom means not driving ourselves to exhaustion, but taking time to be renewed and energized by the spirit that we might live out the good news of the gospel each day. Striving towards the kingdom means retaining enough energy to be inspired to recall that, as our vocation is from God and our labor intended for his glory, each earthly task, from the most daunting to the exceedingly mundane has heavenly implications. Striving towards the kingdom means working toward social righteousness. Striving toward the kingdom means living in the joyful tension that while we are commissioned for such a great work, we are at once called to rest assured that it is this very kingdom that God desires to give to us, and will give us out of his good grace rather than by any measure of our worth. Jesus' desire is that even our work towards the kingdom be free from anxiety as the task to which we are called to as Christians- this striving toward the kingdom- is a work to be celebrated as a form of worship rather than something that binds us to obligation or guilt or law or death. Christ commissions us not to fret over the details but find life in them because God is at work in them and providing for our need in ways that transcend the limits of our imagination. Even Solomon in his glory cannot rival such a provision. And in the space taken up by anxiety we are called to find time for what truly matters in life because life is not worth missing for worry over that which is already provided for. The word Jesus uses for worry, *merimnate*, means 'to be anxious about,' 'cumbered with,' and 'to do,' or put forth an effort. He is speaking not to those who truly wonder where they will find their next meal but to those who have enough but worry over having more. To those who have much but worry over protecting it. This worry takes effort, and this requires an energy that can be better spent on living, seeking out ways to share our abundance with others, and delighting in our participation in God's work through our own work, with eyes open to the blessings around us and within all that we do each day. As one theologian suggests, Jesus recalls that are efforts are to be focused on who we are rather than on what we have, and on what we are becoming rather than how we will get ahead.

The author of Ecclesiastes offers a word to us alongside Jesus regarding our anxiety over the details, he says "As we come naked from our mother's womb, so will we return as we came. We will take nothing from the fruit of our labor that can be carried in our hands...here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which we toil under the sun during the few years of our lives which God has given us; for this is our reward." "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.