

“Strive for All These Things”
March 13, 2022

Isaiah 49: 8-16a
Matthew 6:24-34

“The Gentiles strive for all these things,” Jesus says.

The Gentiles—that would be us:

those of little faith,

those who find it hard to trust God,

those who seem to know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

The Gentiles—that would be us:

striving for “all these things”—food, drink, clothing, and so much more,

worrying about tomorrow when we already have enough trouble today.

No one comes to Iowa City to be a slacker. People come here to study hard, to learn to think or to play an instrument or to act or to write better than when they first arrived. You stay here because you find this a place that calls out the best in you, because you like being around other strivers, and because of that you feel there are many things worth worrying about: a project at work, a patient’s diagnosis, a student’s progress, the needs of a client or customer.

You came here—and you stay here—because this is a place to strive.

And most of the time most of us are far too busy to look at the birds of the air or consider the lilies of the field.

Even so, Jesus invites us Gentiles, we who strive and worry, to pause for a while—if only for a few minutes this morning—so that we might put our work and our lives and our striving into a larger context and rest in God’s love and care for us.

Your worries are many, aren’t they?

But if we rest from those worries for a short time then we can hear—as if for the first time, or maybe *actually* for the first time—that wonderful question Jesus asks those who would follow him, even us: “Are you not of more value than the birds of the air?”

This is where listening to Jesus today gets both difficult and important.

It’s easy to hear this simply as a little self-esteem pep talk—not that most of us couldn’t use a little more self-esteem. But if that is all that we are able to hear in these words we will miss something more.

Jesus is speaking not so much about our own *self*-esteem as he is about God's love for us. Looking with us at the birds and the flowers, Jesus invites us to consider the value God places on each and all of us.

You might remember that wonderful story about St. Lawrence, an early deacon who was brought before a Roman official in the third century. The official was convinced that the Christians were in possession of a number of gold objects and demanded that Lawrence bring out the treasures of the church. For several days he quietly went about gathering up the children and the elderly, the frail and the infirm. Bringing them before the official, Lawrence told him, "*These* are the treasures of the church. But you can have the gold."

We are God's treasure: broken, hurting, *sinful*—and infinitely loved by the God who creates and renews— of even more value than the bird or the flowers. This does not disparage the rest of creation or minimize the importance of our stewardship of the earth. But these words of Jesus encourage us in our daily living. For there are times when fear and failure will press in. There are times when self-doubt will seem the soundest approach to take.

At such times Jesus lovingly asks: "Are you not of more value?"

That question carries with it the judgment of God in the most welcome sense of that phrase.

You are of great value. These are the words to remember when it is three in the morning and the worry that plagues you does not cease. These are the words to remember when your music does not sound as you imagine it should, when the needed inspiration does not come, when the project falls apart, when the relationship crumbles. These are the words that invite us to rest even as we give all that we have and all that we are to our families and our friends, to our community and our work.

These are words to carry with us in these days so filled, as all days are filled, with possibility and danger.

God's judgment has come and it is this: you are of great value.

With that judgment on our minds and in our hearts let us hear once more the words of Jesus: "Do not worry... do not strive."

It's difficult if not impossible to stop worrying simply because someone—even Jesus—tells us not to worry.

Of course we worry. Worry comes unbidden as does the restoring breath.

Life *is* fragile. We know that. We sing it in our hymns, telling God and telling ourselves: "Time, like an ever-flowing stream, soon bears us all away." Accidents happen. Pandemics happen. Illness runs its course, bodies fail. Markets collapse. Empires invade. And for all of our progress, all of our focus on security, all of our planning, the fragility of life continues to be a part of our daily reality.

An awareness of this fragility can lead to worry if we let it.

Or we can let an awareness of our fragility lead to a deepening sense of grace—a sense of God’s care for all of creation, and, yes, even for us in our prosperity *and* in our adversity. Even in our worry and our striving, God speaks to us through the prophet: “I have inscribed you on the palms of my hand.”

In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus calls those who follow him to a non-anxious way. And of course, we know all the reasons why this is such unrealistic advice.

An unstable world and our various individual troubles can constrict us and keep us from experiencing life as it truly is in the freedom and security of God’s love.

We worry and fret.

To just such people Jesus says, “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?”

Listen carefully to what Jesus says. The call to trust in God’s good care does not exempt us from working or keep us from having property. He speaks to people who sow and reap and store, people who toil and spin—that is to people like you and me.

When Jesus urges us to consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, he is asking us to do just that—consider. We are not called to become flowers or animals, but to *take into account* God’s providential care for all creation as we face all that worries and perplexes us as we live our very human lives.

Again, we don’t need to take the words of Jesus in a legalistic or literal manner. But we can hear in them a call to see that life does not consist of sowing, reaping, toiling, and storing alone. To an extent that most people in the world cannot imagine, we do not need to worry about what we will eat, what we will drink, or what we will wear. All these things have been given to us. And so, we are challenged to go beyond our worries toward a life that matters.

Worry has its place, but its benefits are limited. It doesn’t increase our height or our length of days. It doesn’t write the paper or finish the project. But if we can’t eliminate our anxiety, perhaps we can at least be aware of it.

In our worry, in our striving, Jesus invites us as the much-valued creatures of the Creator to recognize the care that we receive, the abundance in which we live, the wealth that is ours.

It is good to plan, to succeed, to do well. We know that the life of faith looks toward the future. Good stewardship of all that God has given requires that we plan. And certainly, we cannot be generous unless we first earn.

So, Jesus does invite us to strive—to get up and get going—but to strive for what he called the “realm of God.” God’s realm is the image of that place, that time, of peace, of justice, of right relationships, of love, of beauty.

God’s realm is not here—but we move toward it in this place in these days.

God's realm is not here—and yet from time to time we recognize that it is here among us. And when we strive to think more clearly, when we strive to create beauty, when we strive to extend welcome and compassion to others, or to love deeply—we are striving for the realm of God.

We look to the future that God is opening up. We are invited to set aside the arrogant thinking that sees life as in our hands alone—to recognize that it is in God that we live and move and have our being.

Jesus tells us today's trouble is enough for this day. Deal with what you can and face tomorrow when it arrives. It's not that Jesus was a positive thinker or naïve about what could happen. Jesus wasn't one to minimize the trouble in any situation. He knew what was in the human heart. He knew the real possibilities of evil and misfortune.

But he also had a deep and abiding sense of the loving care of God—and commended that trust to his followers.

So while we often ask: "What will I do *when* . . . or "What will I do *if* . . .?" While we often ask, "What will I do *next*?" We might be better off to ask: "What *can* I do *now*?" remembering the Jewish proverb: "If you *can* do nothing, you *need* do nothing." We are called to act when we are able—indeed, to do all that we possibly can—and we are invited to abide in God's care at those times when nothing can be done. As is has been suggested, we should act as though it all depends on us and we should pray as though it all depends on God.

"Tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." We worry and fret. Jesus focuses our attention on what we can do in the present moment—and on what God is able to do when we can do nothing.

In the greatest adversity, when God seems silent or absent, God is still at work in the world and in our lives. In a world that moves toward death and despair, resurrection turns us in the direction of life and hope. This faith in the God revealed through Jesus Christ, who leads us to hope and to act for the good in all the adversity of life.

In the days ahead: Consider.

Consider, yes, the birds of the air and the lilies of the field.

We work. We strive.

We succeed. We fail. We strive.

Slowly the realm of God becomes more visible among us.

Slowly we see the wealth that surrounds us, the grace that sustain us.

Through it all remember: you are of great value.

You are of great value.

