

Rev. Lisa Schrott

July 17, 2022

Luke 12: 22-31

The Sacred in the Ordinary: Birds and Flowers

Prayer of Illumination

Loving God, send your Holy Spirit upon the reading of your Word that it may serve to show us the path of life and lead us into your presence where there is fullness of joy. Amen.

As we continue our summer worship series on “The Sacred in the Ordinary” we turn our attention to flowers and birds in the Gospel of Luke. As we ponder how the ravens and lilies, the sparrows and tulips can teach us about the kingdom of God, we are also considering how these passages can help us better understand the elements in our worship service.

Our worship service is arranged in four acts: gathering around the word, proclaiming the word, responding to the word and following the word into the world. One of the ways in which we respond to the word is through prayer, and for us here at PCO an integral part of that is our Prayers of the People – prayers led by congregation members that lift up concerns from the global to the particular. We pray these prayers as act an faith and as an acknowledgement of the relationship we already have with God. Hear now these words from Luke Chapter 12 as reminder to whom we belong.

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 which of you by worrying can 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 seeking 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 seek all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek God’s kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

A couple of weeks ago Brian and I were visiting Windmill Gardens in Holland. Mixed with the descriptions of windmill technology and procedures for milling wheat, the introductory video spoke about the tulip festival and how scholars believe that the “lilies of the field” in our scripture passage this morning may have actually referred to tulips. I was dubious about this,

but tucked it away in the portion of my brain reserved for random facts and experiences that will end up in sermons. Yes – there actually is a little box in the brain – neural network – devoted to that.

As I was preparing for this message, I looked at various Bible translations and saw some used wildflowers rather than lilies, but no tulips. So I broke out the Greek and looked at the word translated as “lily.” In the Greek it is *krinon* and in four Greek dictionaries it is translated directly as lily. In one it is translated as lily or attractive wild flower. Then the trail got warm when I checked the Louw and Nida Greek lexicon. It translated *krinon* as any one of several types of flowers, usually uncultivated — wild flower. It continued, “though traditionally *krinon* has been regarded as a type of lily, scholars have suggested several other possible references, including an anemone, a poppy, a gladiolus, and a rather inconspicuous type of daisy”.¹ Lots of options, but no tulips.

Not ready to give up and cast aspersions on the good folks in Holland, I decided to see what Google could find. It only took a few clicks to stumble on the website *Flowers in Israel*, and lo and behold a whole page devoted to tulips. It turns out that tulips were actually a late arrival to Holland (the other Holland) coming in the 17th century by a biologist who received a few bulbs from his friend the ambassador to Constantinople. Apparently tulips are native to the eastern Mediterranean and thrive in the woodlands and shrublands of Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Israel, Jordan and Egypt. And just in case you need some more cocktail party trivia, the name “tulip” comes from the Persian word meaning turban.² So it just might be the case that Jesus was referring tulips in this passage, and it makes it even more appropriate that we have lilies and tulips together at Easter. I’ll have to do more digging about the daffodils.

The upshot of this very long tangent is that the scholars seem to agree that Jesus was referencing flowers and birds that were common to the area – not a rare or unique entity – but something the disciples and the crowds would encounter on a daily basis, maybe not even noticing them until they stopped to smell the roses, so to speak. These flowers and birds, while quite ordinary were also in fact quite sacred – set apart by God to be tended and cared for, loved and nurtured even though their lives may be short – here today and tomorrow gone. Note that Jesus doesn’t say that the birds and flowers will be protected from all harm, nor that droughts and diseases or climate change won’t affect their ability to thrive. Rather the passage can be better appreciated if read as poetry rather than prose. The ravens and the lilies - the birds and the flowers - become larger than life. They symbolize God’s providential care.

This should be an easy message to hear and absorb. And yet, I struggle with this text because it challenges us to go beyond the surface words, which is often how this text is read – as a call

¹ Louw, J.P. and Nida, Eugene Albert (eds). *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*. Electronic version embedded in Accordance Bible Software. OakTree Software, 2014.

² http://www.flowersinisrael.com/Tulipaagenensis_page.htm

for embracing a philosophy of “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” as Bobby McFerrin sung. Or a call to embrace instant gratification. Or as an antidote to the *Worst Case Survival Handbook*. Or an invitation to irresponsibility. Is this passage just the biblical equivalent of a glass of wine? It has been taken that way by various people throughout history. As New Testament professor Jason Byasse says, “Does Jesus not know that our entire industry of mood altering drugs is premised on people’s inability to avoid anxiety? Does he not realize that Western economies depend on massive spending on commodities people do not need?”³ Remember back to 2001 when the mantra was, “If you don’t shop, the terrorists win.” When we were anxious about the COVID-19 pandemic, we shopped - e-commerce sales jumped 43% in 2020.⁴ Don’t worry about what you will eat - Instacart, Door Dash, Grub Hub, Uber Eats to the rescue. Don’t worry about what you will wear – after all no one can see you are wearing sweat pants in a Zoom meeting. As we read this scripture do we internalize a message that this text all about us, in our ego and vanity? About how special we are – more special than the glory of nature around us.

I think it is about more than that. I’d like us instead to think about what this passage tells about God - God’s character - about who God is and how God wants us to live our lives so that God’s kingdom on earth looks a little more like God’s kingdom in heaven, as we pray in the Lord’s Prayer.

Let’s take a step back and see where we are in the context of scripture. In the trajectory of Jesus’ ministry, we are about midway. Jesus’ ministry began as he travelled around Galilee, as recorded in Luke chapters 4-9. In Luke chapter 10, Jesus and the disciples start the journey to Jerusalem, where Jesus will ultimately face betrayal and the cross. This journey to Jerusalem encompasses nearly 10 chapters and the bulk of Jesus’ teaching, including most of the parables we associate with Luke. Just before this passage, we hear teachings on prayer, persecution, and treasures – the folly of building bigger barns to hold the more we purchase to feel secure. Jesus has tough words on what the world says we should value.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus’ teaching on and inclusion of those of the margins of society is particularly notable. We hear this self-description of Jesus’ ministry in Luke chapter 4, “When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”⁵

³ Jason Byasse. Matthew 6:24-34. *Feasting on the Word. Year A. Volume 1*. Ed. By David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown-Taylor. Westminster John Knox Press, 2010. p404 (Note that this commentary is on the version of this passage in the Gospel of Matthew).

⁴ <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/04/ecommerce-sales-surged-during-pandemic.html>

⁵ Luke 4:16-18

Looking through the lens of Jesus' description of his own ministry helps me to interpret the end of this morning's scripture passage: "And do not keep seeking 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 seek all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek God's kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well." We sang these words just a few minutes ago.

Seek God's kingdom and these things will be given to you. Seeking God's kingdom for me is the essence of prayer. Prayer is a continual, always process and participation in the life of God. This means that prayer is not a one-time request with a discrete answer, but an on-going dialogue with God. Prayer is part of the process that God uses to carry out God's will, and a way in which we understand that God is at work. A challenge for us is to grasp that the efficacy of prayer is not in an answer that we might like or desire, but rather a deepened faith as we participate in the life of God. The fear that no one is listening to our prayer is replaced by assurance that because of who God who is, God's action will follow. And part of prayer is an invitation to transformation – an invitation for us to act to bring God's kingdom a little closer to reality. As professor Byasse remarks, "So when the poor in our community or around the world cry out to God for mercy, the answer to their prayers ought to be *us*. Only if we crowd out our own worries for food, drink and clothing with the fear of Jesus, can we begin to be the answer to their prayer."⁶

Friends, we can be the answer to their prayer. That's what we do each week in the Prayers of the People – we lift up prayers known to us, prayers known to others, prayers known only to God. For a moment we crowd out our worries and we remember we are better and stronger and closer to the kingdom when we are the people of God in community. When we come to God in all our humanity, in all of our brokenness, in all of our despair and we collect the humanity and brokenness and despair of all our siblings in Christ and we bring it all to God. And from all of the shattered pieces, hope emerges through the prayer because we acknowledge that we are God's children and God cares for us like God cares for the lilies and the ravens.

The Rev. Quincy Washington is Pastor of the Highland Park Presbyterian Church in Highland Park, IL. Following the July 4th shootings in his town, he penned a commentary for the *Presbyterian Outlook* titled *Hope for Shattered Pieces*. As he was trying to process the tragedy, his mom reminds him, "God is there. God is with those people helping them through the struggle." And somehow it seemed so honest, so sincere from her that I didn't doubt it." Washington continues, "I have to believe that right now. And I do believe that right now; in my heart-of-hearts, I do. Because it seems clear to me through my study of Scripture and faith that it's in our moments of greatest brokenness that God's love and grace come pouring out. The bread is broken in communion for more grace. Seeds are broken for new life. Christ was broken for resurrection.

⁶ Jason Byasse. p406 *ibid*.

God somehow takes the pieces of our broken hearts, no matter how small, and fits them together to make things whole. So maybe we take this brokenness that we feel right now and instead of hiding it from each other, we show each other the jagged and sharp edges – the really painful parts – and we see if these pieces can fit together so we can work together to bring about the world, the life, the kingdom that God intends for us all. Maybe we pray, we lament, and we get to work.”

Washington ends by saying, “And so I cling to that truth — that just when it seems as though everything is broken so badly that it turns to dust, God shows up in the most profound ways to do something beyond expectation and belief. Somehow in that brokenness, God brings healing. And I believe that God does that through ordinary people like you and me.”⁷

Ordinary people like you and me. Ordinary people who live into their sacred calling to bear each other’s burdens. As you heard in the Children’s Sermon, in a few minutes we will have an opportunity to make visual our commitment to pray for each other, to pray for our community, to pray for world, to pray for creation. These prayers will remain on display throughout the summer as reminders that prayer is a continual, always process. Prayer is a way we participate in the life of God. Prayer is part of the process that God uses to carry out God’s will, a way in which we understand that God is at work. And if we crowd out our own worries for food, drink and clothing, we can we begin to be the answer to others’ prayers. Join me in prayer.

⁷“Hope for Shattered Pieces” by the Rev. Quincy Washington, Pastor of the Highland Park Presbyterian Church in Highland Park, IL begins.⁷
<https://pres-outlook.org/2022/07/hope-for-shattered-pieces/>