

“Therefore, I say to you, don’t worry about your life, what you’ll eat or what you’ll drink, or about your body, what you’ll wear. Isn’t life more than food and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds in the sky. They don’t sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren’t you worth much more than they are? Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? Notice how the lilies in the field grow. They don’t wear themselves out with work, and they don’t spin cloth. But I say to you that even Solomon in all of his splendor wasn’t dressed like one of these. If God dresses grass in the field so beautifully, even though it’s alive today and tomorrow it’s thrown into the furnace, won’t God do much more for you, you people of weak faith? Therefore, don’t worry and say, ‘What are we going to eat?’ or ‘What are we going to drink?’ or ‘What are we going to wear?’ Gentiles long for all these things. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them. Instead, desire first and foremost God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

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We are wrapping up our three-week Stewardship Series “First--putting God First in our Giving and Living.” We explored idolatry and examined the idols and false gods that clamor for our attention. We peeled back the layers of the myth of scarcity, which lies and tells us that we will never have enough, and we will never be enough. We are called to share our abundance, crafting bigger tables, and not bigger barns. Finally, we wrap up this series with Jesus’ instructions not to worry, because God will take care of you.

When I was a pre-teen, the popular movie of the moment was The Lion King. The Lion King is more or less Hamlet set in the African plains. Jealous Scar, brother to the Lion King Mufasa, hatches a plan to murder the king and his young son, Simba. And his plan half-way succeeds. The King is killed, but the young cub

escapes, finding refuge in the wilderness. Young Simba is awash in grief and guilt. But he meets two affable and care-free wanderers--a meerkat and a warthog, who begin to teach them their problem-free philosophy: Hakuna Matata. Hukana Matata, in swahili, means “no worries.” Embracing the no-worries lifestyle, Simba joins them, and spends languid years in the jungle.

Hakuna matata--what a wonderful phrase. But Simba cannot hide from his past, and when a childhood friend finds him and begs him to return home, Simba is faced with a difficult choice.

This passage from Matthew is one of my favorites in the New Testament, but it also confounds me almost daily. As much as I would like to trust Jesus that God will provide, his “don’t worry about tomorrow” philosophy might as well be sung by a meerkat and warthog. Doesn’t Jesus know that it’s Stewardship Season? Has Jesus ever attended a budget meeting? Did he ever send in a pledge card?

The thing is, though, Jesus probably does know all about church finances and the complexities of the global economy. Jesus does know, and because he does not want us to get all wrapped in knots over how we are going to keep the lights on and whether or not there is food in the fridge. As one commentary for today points out, “Jesus understands this; his call to worry-free living is not based on unrealistic views of the world. His words are for those who understand that God will not leave us without resources or support. We can face life with all its uncertainties and contingencies with the assurance that we are not alone—that God hears, sees, and cares about us and our situations. [Hakuna matata] because God is in control.”¹

Because God is God, and we are not, we are called to live in a way that honors God in our living and giving. By putting God first, we turn from worshipping the other gods in our life that do not not promote wholeness, flourishing, and dignity. By Seeking God First, we share in God’s abundance. Finally, Jesus calls us to reject the money-centered life and embrace a God-centered life.

¹ Barbara Essex. *Feasting on the Word Year A: Vol. 1Th*

In my experience, congregations struggle with the temptation to trust in our money instead of trusting God. Churches are a unique institution: we are not a business, but we do have investments. We are a non-profit, but we don't fit in neatly with non-profit world. Churches tend to either freeze or flow when it comes to money.

Churches FREEZE when they begin to be fearful that their money will run out and their resources will run dry. Any creative thinking or bold steps in mission freezes. Ironically, it is by freezing, that the resources eventually become freezer-burned and of no use to anyone. An example would be an once prosperous church that saw their membership numbers dwindle. The neighborhood demographics shifted from white-collar businesspeople to recent immigrants. As the congregation shrank, they began to freeze.

When churches rely on the Holy Spirit, and go with the flow, they will find that the Spirit will sustain them more than they had ever hoped. This congregation also once was prosperous, but the big manufacturing plant in town closed down a few decades ago and took many people with it. Instead of freezing their assets, this congregation heard the Spirit's call to start an after-school feeding program, and this small but mighty church is still around today, less money in the bank, but spiritually vibrant.

In truth, most congregations go through freeze-and-flow seasons, sometimes even in the same year. Jesus' words become the refrain--a place to return when the anxiety and worry begins to set in. It's important that members of the congregation recognize the anxiety in the midst and then intentionally engage in practices that evoke calm, rather than panic. Brene Brown writes, "A panicked response produces more panic and more fear. As psychologist and writer Harriet Lerner says, "Anxiety is extremely contagious, but so is calm." The question becomes, Do we want to infect people with more anxiety, or heal ourselves and the people around us with calm?"²

² Brene Brown, "The Gifts of Imperfection," pg 125

Maybe Jesus' point is not just to soothe our own frets and worries, but so that we can spread calm in our communities. Practicing calm does not mean stuffing down feelings or diminishing our own anxiety and worries. Practicing calm allows us to take a step back and assess the situation. Letting that worry flow out and flow through leaves room for calm. We can heal ourselves and others with calm, and maybe that is precisely what Jesus would have us do.

Jesus is not calling us all to abandon our lives and move to the desert to join a monastery or to empty our savings accounts and 401(k)s. Rather, he is addressing the basis for excessive worry and anxiety that can result from a life separated from God. The text calls us to a different set of values, different priorities... True discipleship, by which we mean anyone who desires to be a follower of Jesus and thus Christian, involves being resolute in a wholehearted devotion to God. One cannot serve two masters.³

Somewhere between Hakuna Matata and excessive worry are the lilies of the field and the sparrows of the air. God provides, and while that doesn't exactly mean "no worries for the rest of our days," it means we can worry less about building wealth and more about sharing our abundance with our neighbors.

Amen.