

LILIES OF THE FIELD

TEXT: Matthew 6:25-34

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on October 25, 2022

This morning is sort of a part two to last week's sermon about the manager in Luke 16, because there are clues in the text that connect the two readings. It's also part two in that I'm going to spend some time on general Bible study information and technique as well as the particular text. Last week we talked about how we can be subconsciously influenced by chapter and verse divisions as well as by section headings and punctuation—all things that were added at least a thousand years after the text was written, and in some cases more. The biblical authors didn't include any of those divisions.

They are helpful tools to be sure, which is why we have them. Once people were actually reading the Scriptures, instead of just hearing them, any help was welcome. As you recall, the earliest manuscripts don't even have spaces in-between the words. But that easy reading comes at a cost. Our brains see the divisions, which often contain bias about which verses go together and which don't, and the added headings often give us a frame for interpretation, which may or may not be what the author intended. We think we're doing our own study, free of influence, when we are being subconsciously led.

I'm not suggesting that's nefarious—we need it to read and study on our own, just like we need to rely on the translators who took the original languages and turned them into English. Translation is also interpretation. By the time we pick up and read the Bible in English in the year 2022, we are reading with millennia of interpretation ringing in our ears and marked on the page, not to mention the frame of our own lives and experiences. There is simply no way to read the Bible free from bias and influence. Our job is to read with that awareness and always leave room for the possibility that, when we read a biblical passage, we might be missing the forest for the trees. Even the trees might turn out to be something else entirely. That awareness is one component of Bible study.

This morning, I want to add another Bible study tool, that can enrich our understanding of a passage and help us ask better questions about it. We should always ask: "Does this passage I'm reading, either all or in part, appear anywhere else in the Bible?" If you're reading in one of the four gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John—that's pretty much a mandatory question, because the gospels have many places where they overlap.

Every gospel tells us things about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. But the authors are not neutral historians, nor do they claim to be. They are believers who want those who hear their account, their gospel, to become believers, too. They just go about that work in different ways and tailor what they write to their different audiences.

By the time the gospels were written down, there were lots of stories about Jesus in circulation. Each gospel writer had access to at least some of that material. Some scholars believe John may have had access to all of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, since John was written so much later than the other three. Each writer picked and arranged the stories and teachings of Jesus to persuade their particular audience.

Last week's parable about the manager was a story only Luke picked, but Luke summed up that story with a saying of Jesus that Matthew also picked for his gospel, even though Matthew doesn't have the story about the manager: "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." Once we see that Matthew has a different context, we should be asking questions. What other things can we learn about the two masters saying by seeing how Matthew uses it?

Like last week, I'm going to encourage you to use the Bible in the pews today so you can see for yourself what happens with that verse about serving two masters in Matthew. The passage that Ginny read for us is found

immediately following, in Matthew 6:25-34. It's on page 6 of the New Testament in the pew Bibles, remembering that the page numbers start over at the end of the Old Testament.

In the very big picture, this passage in Matthew is part of what we've come to call Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount runs from Matthew chapter 5 through chapter 8. Although the lilies of the field passage is famous enough to have an Oscar-winning movie based on it—and I do encourage you to watch the 1963 Sidney Poitier film, "Lilies of the Field," if you've never seen it. You can rent it on Amazon Prime Video for under \$4. Beautiful and totally consistent with the passage. But by far the best-known passage in Matthew 6 is the Lord's Prayer, which is back one page, if you're looking at it.

Last week we tied the forgiveness of debts in the manager parable to the line in the Lord's Prayer asking God to forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. It's fair to say that the next line of the prayer, "Give us this day, our daily bread," is the point of the lilies of the field passage. And, just like "Give us this day our daily bread" is right next to the line in the prayer about forgiving economic debt, so the lilies of the field passage is right next to the verses about not serving two masters.

And yet, the section heading for the two masters saying just orphans those verses like they have nothing whatsoever to do with anything else around them. Look at how the pew Bible breaks up that first column on p. 6. It implies a whole unconnected string of teachings about various things: "Concerning Treasures," "The Sound Eye," "Serving Two Masters," then our passage for this morning called "Do Not Worry."

Again, those are additions by the publisher. They are not part of the biblical manuscript. The New International Version does a bit better and their grouping puts verses 19-24 all under a section they call "Treasures in Heaven." But then they start our passage under the same "Do Not Worry" heading. Both of those translations subtly tell us that we're changing topics. As far as they're concerned, we're done with money and now we're out in the fields considering birds and lilies.

But, just like last week, in the manuscripts, there is not so much as a space between the verses about serving two masters and the teaching about worry in the actual biblical text. Are they really separate? To answer that, let's play one more round of "Is this passage somewhere else?"

Unlike the manager parable, the lilies of the field passage is **not** unique to Matthew. It's not in Mark or John, but Luke has it in chapter 12. That's on page 70 in the NT portion of your pew Bibles. (But keep a finger in Matthew 6.) In Luke, the Bible publisher has again told us that this is a passage about worry. But Luke's account differs from Matthew's version in a couple of ways.

In Matthew's version, Jesus just tells us to consider the birds. In Luke, Jesus specifically names ravens. In Bible study, questions are your friend. Is there any reason Jesus might single out ravens from all the other birds? That question leads to another. Where else in the Bible do ravens play a role? Oh yeah, back in 1 Kings 17, it's the ravens who come and feed the prophet Elijah when he has nothing to eat. God provided for Elijah by providing first for the ravens, who then were willing to share with the human prophet.

In both versions, the lilies of the field passage comes after talk about money. We saw in Matthew that it immediately follows the two-masters line in verse 24, which itself connects back to the warning not to store up treasures on earth—"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also," which is Matthew 6:21. In the NRSV translation in your pew Bibles, that's three whole sub headings before the lilies of the field, despite being only 4 verses earlier.

Do *those* verses occur elsewhere? Yup. Guess where? Luke ends *his* lilies of the field passage with this: "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." Same line as Matthew 6:21.

Every sermon I've ever heard about the lilies of the field passage has focused on worry and anxiety. And every Bible translation I've seen that uses sub-headings has set it apart from everything else with a heading that says, "Do not worry." That's not entirely wrong, but in both Matthew and Luke—the only places the passage

appears—it’s specifically worry about having enough wealth to meet our basic needs. The surrounding passages in both gospels imply that such worry can lead us to hoard our resources. And hoarding our resources is the first step toward making money an idol, which leaves us trying in vain to serve two masters.

In both Matthew and Luke, the lilies of the field passage begins with the word, “Therefore.” Jesus is continuing a thought, not starting a new subject. In Matthew, Jesus is continuing the teaching about not being able to serve God and money. In Luke, the word “Therefore” refers back to the parable about a man who took an abundant harvest and stored up all the excess grain in barns for himself. The line right before the lilies of the field in Luke 12:21 says, “This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.” And then it talks about ravens who never store their food in barns.

Even though worry about having enough to eat was exactly the problem that led even a rich man to just keep hoarding an abundant harvest for himself, we are subtly led to see the section about the lilies of the field as a different subject, even though it begins, “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 clothes.” We almost always miss that the lilies of the field is part of a larger teaching about money.

All that might seem like nitpicking on technicalities. But in a world of sound bites and headline-only news, those technical choices have consequences. Whether you are in Matthew or Luke, as you’re glancing through the chapters looking for something to read or even something to preach about, most people are going to go straight for the comfort food: “Do Not Worry” the headline beckons.

But that advice not to worry is only helpful when it’s part of the larger sections in each gospel that could be titled “Do not hoard.” Matthew and Luke understood that the only way **all** of us can actually be free from worrying about food and clothing is if **some** of us don’t hoard all the wealth by storing up all their treasure on earth.

Luke’s account ends with the command to give alms. Matthew 6 begins with a passage about giving alms without making a show of it or even letting your right hand know what your left is doing. If all of us live out the first part, none of us need to worry about our basic needs. Just like God fed Elijah by feeding ravens who then shared what they had instead of storing it in barns; so it is meant to be with God’s people.

If we don’t connect the cycle of giving and receiving; if we preach “do not worry” without connecting it to “do not hoard,” it’s far too easy to use the lilies of the field to soothe the general anxieties of the rich and shame the poor if they complain that their basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter are not met. Hey, you of little faith, God will provide. What are you asking me for? No handouts for you. Don’t you believe the Bible?

Neither Matthew nor Luke gave us such lopsided interpretations; but all the additional divisions can easily mask our view of the bigger picture. Jesus never teaches that God is going to miraculously drop food and clothing for the poor so they shouldn’t worry about it. Even the miracle of the loaves and fishes began with a boy simply sharing his lunch.

We are not to hoard our abundance, but share it with others, so that no one need worry about their lives, what they will eat, or about their bodies, what they will wear. God meets our needs through each other. When we all share, there is enough for all. When we store up our treasures, our hearts will be there and not with God, the poor will suffer, and Matthew tells us in chapter 25 that our failure to share food and clothing with the least of these is the same as not sharing with him. We cannot serve two masters. We cannot serve both God and money. Amen.