

# *And All These Things Will Be Given...*

Peter JB Carman  
Emmanuel Friedens Church, Schenectady NY  
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## **Matthew 6:25-33**

*"Therefore 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? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, 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, will he not much more clothe you--you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and God's justice, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

Bobby McFerrin was an artist I used to much enjoy. However, one of my least favorite songs of all times was the pop tune that came out in the 1980's with the dubious words "Don't worry, be happy." I don't mean to be a killjoy, but these words struck me at the time as pretty misleading! Weren't we justified in being a little worried? At the time I was a serious-minded pastor. I worked with homeless people. I was aware of wars that were killing the innocent. And here was some singer saying we should quit being so anxious, and get happy. It was a little bit like the feeling I would get in church in those years, when preachers would tell us how we should all have thankful hearts. Look at how good our lives were! I was fortunate in those years to hear another pastor, our executive minister in Connecticut, use the term "Thanks-glibbing." I came to believe that in order to be about living real lives of gratitude we had to find a way of thanksgiving that was both honest and based on the rock of God's love, not the shifting sands of good fortune.

And about this "don't worry" business. When my old friend Erl used to say "Don't worry, relax" I knew he was about to pull a really bad stunt. The words "Don't worry" usually makes smart people worry all the more. People have serious concerns, worries. Let's not guilt them into secrecy!

And yet.... So often the Good News of Jesus has that AND YET! And yet I must tell you that we find in the Sermon on the Mount, the heart of Jesus' teachings: Jesus wants his followers to lay aside our usual anxieties and worries, and get with a radically different and more joyful program. Right there next to wanting us to love our enemies, share all we have, live lives of peacemaking and utter clarity, that is where we find it. "Therefore 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? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not

of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?”

Jesus is not glib about thankfulness—but he invites us to lives of thankfulness. Jesus is compassionate with our struggles and wants—but I submit to you that Jesus also wants us to live our lives liberated of fear, set free from the chains of worry about our own well-being. He hopes for us to live lives grateful to God, loving our neighbors...as much as we love ourselves. Yes, he wants us to love ourselves too.

This passage we read from Matthew used to bother me, with its birds of the air and lilies of the field. Birds, after all, may fly well, but they don't always last very long. When I was a child, they used to crash into our picture window, often with fatal results. As for lilies of the field, they may be pretty but they are here and gone... Do *we* really want to be like that? I've often gotten stuck on how vulnerable God's creatures are! So how can we not worry?

And yet. And yet it came to me this last week that Jesus was well aware of how fragile the birds of the air and the grass of the ground are. Also you and me! The world of Jesus' day had terror close at hand and far way, as ours does. So what Jesus is really up to here is something deeper than what I have been giving him credit for. In order to get us to quit worrying so much, he doesn't say, "You will live happily ever after." He is not naïve about everything going well for us if we just love the Lord. Jesus knows we will face good times and hard times. He knows that people are forced to suffer sometimes for what they believe is right. Often folk have to suffer for no good reason at all! Nonetheless, Jesus of Nazareth, who embraced his own suffering and death, challenges us to start with joy instead of fear. Start with hope instead of despair! Start with God's love and care instead of self-doubt and suspicion!

So I have had to go back to the passage and look a little deeper. Here is what I have been missing: I had been missing the joy in it. And I had been missing the beauty! I had been so wrapped up in the worry part, that I had missed the beauty. Jesus asks us to look at ourselves and our own lives with as much joy as we have when we behold the wonders of the rest of God's good creation. Jesus begins with the beauty of what God has made.

How can I make this plain? I for one look at the birds and the flowers all the time, and let me say it like my late Grandma Naomi, in the springtime. "Oh my, how beautiful!" she used to say. "Look at the azaleas, Peter. And oh, the dogwood." Maybe you do the same! But when it comes to looking at our fellow human beings we forget to do it, we take for granted what we see. Until we miss them. Lately I have been missing a lot! I keep finding myself noticing the beauty in friends who have died—or moved. If I have a new year's resolution this year it will be to notice sooner, and say something about it!

If we forget to notice the beauty and wonder in our neighbors and friends, how much more so we miss them in ourselves. I am reminded of the bit in *Tuesdays with Morrie* where we learn that Morrie has asked his friends to hold a funeral service in advance, because he wants to get to hear all the nice things people have to say about him! Remember Tom Sawyer, hiding in church and listening with tearful appreciation as he is eulogized?

So today I look out at all of you, I look at each of you, and these are the words that come to me: “My God. You are gorgeous!” Do you believe me? Because God thinks it about you all the time.

I tried this idea out on my friends who are ministers in a bible study once some time ago. One of them looked at me and said, “Maybe you need to take the next step. Can you say ‘My God, *I’m* gorgeous?’”

Who, me?! That one is hard for me. I was brought up a good little Baptist, and we were taught to be modest. I suspect some of you were brought up the same way in the United Church of Christ, or the Catholic Church you grew up in or...or! “Handsome is as handsome does”. Then there was “Pride goeth before a fall.” And so on. OK, well and good. But we’ve learned something in the years since. We have learned that false modesty is no better than false pride. We have learned that self-hatred is far more dangerous than a modicum of self-respect. We have learned that God loves us, and that God sees us as beautiful. We have learned that there is an inner beauty that radiates out of every human being when love is set free to express itself. Yes, even you and me!

Let’s try this again. Turn to your neighbor and try it: “You are gorgeous.” And then if you dare, now, and if you don’t dare to now, then when you are alone and whispering, try these words: “My God, I am gorgeous.” Say it like a prayer! Especially if you need help believing it.

If we can dare to perceive ourselves as a beautiful part of God’s wondrous making, it gives us a great start in seeking God’s will for the world and us in it, rather than getting anxious over our own survival and comfort. Let me say that again! If we can dare to perceive ourselves as a beautiful part of God’s wondrous making, it gives us a great start in seeking God’s will for the world and us in it, rather than getting anxious over our own survival and comfort.

A healthy sense of our place in God’s world, a sense of dignity and worth, a sense of comfort with God’s flight plan in the crazy windy bumpy environment that is human living, is going to get us better focused on what is and isn’t important, what is and isn’t right, than all the worrying in the world.

Right now, you and I live in a world in which fear seems to be the reasonable response to almost everything. There is a cult of security that has grown up around us. We find we are often manipulated through the fear, through the anxiety, so that we are afraid to speak, afraid to protest, afraid to go out, afraid to visit some people and places. Risks fill us with dread. We are like birds afraid to flap our wings and fly, lest we fall or hit something; like lilies afraid to blossom, in case someone notices and plucks us.

The world does not need the followers of Jesus to be afraid. When governors in multiple states start to talk about excluding a whole group of refugees because of their national origin, the nation needs followers of Jesus to insist that hospitality and compassion must outstrip visceral fear. The world needs us to be salt and light. The world needs us to be ready to step out in faith; to speak truth to power; to raise our voices for peace deep rooted in justice, or at least stand on a sidewalk and be noticed. As followers of Christ it is up to us to actually see and love somebody

no one else notices is lovely. The world needs us as disciples of Jesus to be ready take some chances for the sake of Love: to give up what is not needed; to let go of our security blankets and our presuppositions and our prejudice.

If we are going to be this kind of pilgrim, this kind of sojourner, this kind of disciple, in 2016, how shall we begin? How shall we tap into the deep reserves of inner joy that come from God?

Look at the birds of the air, I say to you, see how beautifully they soar—and look into your neighbor's eyes—and notice how she too can soar. Look into your own heart, and dare to see with Christ's eyes, that you and I can fly. Hey, if I can, so can you. We'll fly together. Why not?