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Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin...

Movement 1 – Wanting Life Done “Right”

When I help people prepare for backpacking trips or hikes I often tell them that there is not one right way to do things. There is not just one outfit or one item of gear or one way of packing. There are options, multiple possibilities, and a variety of ways to see things. There is not one right way to go into the wilderness, but there are wrong ways. If you show up on a backpacking trip wearing all denim, shirt, pants, jacket, you are not going to do well. Denim is made of cotton and cotton is not good to wear when going into the wilderness.

If you are hiking and you take out a granola bar to snack on and then throw the wrapper in the woods, that is a wrong way to take care of your trash. There are many options, many possibilities, but there are wrong ways of doing things.

If you show up with an extension cord that is five miles long so you can have a working fridge and curling iron at the campsite, then you have found a wrong way of doing things. There are many right ways, and there are also wrong ways of going backpacking. Part of what I do is try to make sure that people find their right way to engage in the wilderness.

Some of us can relate to this desire to do things correctly and to be right. We think about building some new steps for the house and we want to make sure that they are done right. We think about cleaning the kitchen and know that there is a way to do that correctly so that it is right. YouTube, TikTok, and other platforms have become a place to find multiple videos that show you the final “right” way to open a jar, or mix sauce, or pour your milk over cereal.

A challenge with church work is that there is a desire to do things right, but that is such a moving target depending on the church, the congregation, the community, and so many other variabilities. Different denominations have different answers to what is right, and within those denominations are even more different ways of understanding what is right. And as Baptists, we understand that what is “right” will even vary from individual to individual. But we still strive to do things right. We draw out the board and committee meetings, going over the small details, talking over the ideas and possibilities, all so that we are sure that we are doing things right. When things are done right we feel good, we feel like we have made progress, we feel like we are in control.

The passage that we are looking at today comes from what is known as the Sermon on the Mount. It is one of the greatest sermons ever preached, and in part Jesus is talking about how one lives life

correctly and right. From the notion of forgiveness to the idea of where and how to build one's spiritual home, Jesus is addressing what it means to be right in one's religious and spiritual life. It is a question of how to be "right" when following God. Jesus talks about relationships, about what it means to be blessed (or in a right relationship with God), about judgement and about forgiveness. It is a sermon that speaks to the idea of being holy and being right with God. It is a sermon that gives us direction towards the right way to do things.

Movement 2 – Will We be Ok?

In the section that we are looking at today, Jesus had just talked about the idea of having enough money and resources. He talks about the futility of saving because it all could soon be gone. Jesus is talking about the idea that when we focus on what we save and what we have, we find that we are not serving God, but instead serving mammon, money, resources. The desire to have enough continues to be a challenge today as we see so many in our society worship the mighty dollar and pay little attention to God. We have to let go of our desire for money.

Yet it is difficult to consider just letting go. We are raised with the notion that it is important to have something saved for that moment when the furnace breaks or the car needs repair. We are raised with the notion that a church without an endowment is a church that is not honoring the legacy of its founder. A church with a healthy endowment is one that can continue its ministry for years and decades to come, and this is a good thing. It may be right to have some money saved away so that you can take care of yourself and of others.

Ah, but this is not meant to be a message that interrogates the notion of money and saving. This is not meant to be a message that makes us uncomfortable about having an endowment. After all, every church that I have worked with has had some kind of endowment. Instead, this is meant to be a message that calls you to consider if you are driven in one way or another with a desire to be "right." If you are driven with a desire to have control, to be prepared, to be living life in a way that you would say is good and appropriate. If you have a desire to be right in your living, in your practices, and in your faith.

In this specific instance, we see a call for us to embrace a lack of worry and anxiety. That is what this part of the Sermon on the Mount is about; a call to let go, to trust, and to not worry. Note the flowers. They are beautiful. Especially at this time of year we love to look at and enjoy the beauty of the flowers as they bloom. But I don't think one flower is trying to outdo another. I don't believe that some flowers are trying to prove themselves or to be better than others. They just are. They are flowers. They just are beautiful, and this is wonderful. But their beauty is not earned, it just is. It is just what the flowers are. They do not try, they do not perform, that just are.

Think of the birds. They do not store and prepare, but instead just live in the moment. They are part of the time, of the day, but do not strive to prove their worth or value. They just are.

I was once hiking with someone who had never had the opportunity to go into the wilderness before. We were moving along, having a good time when he stopped and said, “Jonathan, look at this!” I looked in his direction and did not notice anything. Rocks, trees, roots, moss, the usual. I wondered aloud at what it was that he was noticing. “The moss – it is like a tiny forest – it is amazing.” I never noticed it before, but when I looked again, I saw the beauty, the complexity, the wonder of all that was growing on the rock. And the moss wasn’t trying. It was not working hard to be the best moss in the world. It was just existing. It was just being moss. And it was beautiful.

It is so hard for many of us to hear this message. It is so hard for many of us to hear that we are good if we just trust God. It is so hard for many of us to hear that we are beautiful because we are created by God. We feel like we need to prove ourselves, we need to show that we are good, we need to demonstrate our worth. Look at the lilies, look at the birds, they do not strive for goodness, they do not worry about being good enough, they just are and it is beautiful.

Into this anxiety, into this worry, Christ calls us to consider creation. Jesus is speaking to the anxiety that there will be enough, that we will be ok with life and with our relationship with God and calls us to look at creation. “Look at the birds of the air... consider the lilies of the field...” Christ calls us to look at creation itself in finding a way out of the cycle of anxiety and worry. This is a great teaching technique because Jesus is calling the people to just look around them, to consider a shared vision. They all see the flowers and the birds. They all know what Jesus is talking about. But more than just calling the people to look around, Jesus is putting the anxiety in a different context. By invoking nature, Jesus is reminding the people and us that God is creator, that God does create and calls us to remember that creation is declared as good. This is important to remember; creation is good. We are looking at the goodness of the work of God and seeing the beauty and the grace of the birds and the flowers.

It is almost trite today to consider the metaphors of nature. It is almost too easy to say that we look at the trees and we learn the importance of planting roots. Or that we look at the otter and learn how important it is to play. Or how the mountains humble us. Yet I think we can go deeper than the surface lesson and I think that is what Jesus is calling us to do.

I have learned a lot of lessons from nature about myself and how to live. And it may be me or it may be what it is that I look to find, but the lessons that I learn usually do not come out of times of sunshine and happiness, but instead out of snow and rain. I have learned that when you are lost it is often better to just stop and calm yourself down. I have learned that when you are uncomfortable and cold it is better to stop and take care of yourself. I have learned that when you are trudging through waist-deep snow, it is ok to say that you are just not going to make it to the top of the mountain. These are not lessons that I can get from poster-sayings or from viewing nature from a distance. These are lessons that call me to get close, to engage, and to fully experience the landscape and the moment.

The people want to know that they will be ok.

We know about that desire. We know about that anxiety of knowing that we will be ok for this feeds our inability to let go and trust. In my experiences rock climbing or going on high rope courses I have seen that one of the most difficult things to do is to let go and believe that you will be ok. It is so difficult to believe that the harness and rope will hold and save you. You want to know that you will be ok.

The weight that we carry, the stuff that we accumulate is so we know that we will be ok. The worries and the anxieties that sit on our shoulder, that knot up our back are the worries that we will be ok. This is what Jesus was talking about; hoarding and saving and making sure you had what you needed for that rainy day. But still worried about that rainy day, that struggle. That specific section of the sermon on the mount is speaking to a worry that the people have that when it comes to their relationship with God knowing that they will be ok. We add on the religious practices, the rituals and the rules, creating a fence and a buffer around the covenant with God so that we can know for certain that we will be ok when it comes to our salvation.

One of my favorite hymns is, “It is Well.” Not only the melody, but the message is so profound to me, reminding me that in the peace of the river or in the midst of the sea billows of sorrow, with God, all will be well. But I still worry. I still get anxious. And I sometimes I sing, “I hope it will be well, but I’m not sure...”

Movement 3 – Trying to Control Others

But it is difficult to just let go. We like to control. We like to make sure that everything is going to happen in the way that we want. To a large degree this has been the focus of our relationship with nature. When it is hot outside, we install A/C and cool down our environment. When it is cold, we turn on the heat. If it is raining, we build structures and stay inside. We want to control our experience of nature so that it conforms to what we think would be right and best for us. There used to be wolves all around this part of the United States, but we didn’t like having them around. We hunted and killed them. And now the deer population is out of control. Tick population is out of control. And gardens are attacked by the feral beasts. This is because we wanted to control nature. So we introduce new, invasive species to make our experience better, to control what we want and it usually doesn’t turn out well.

We cannot control everything. When I go hiking I have to accept that if it is cold outside then I am going to get cold. And if it is raining I will get wet. And if the trail goes up a mountain, I am going to be out of breath. I cannot control the environment. I can prepare, I can adapt, but I cannot control. I was once on a hike when I encountered day four of continuous rain. I was at my wit’s end. I was livid at the rain. And then I realized, it isn’t about me. The rain is not out to get me. It is just going to rain and that is how things are and there is nothing I can do about it, but I do not need to take it personally. Rain is going to do what rain is going to do, I just need to learn to adapt and go with it. And I would have to trust that I would be ok. I need to put on a raincoat. I needed to make something warm to drink. I was not going to change the weather, but I was going to be ok.

How many relationships have you been in when you want to change the other person, control the other person? As a local church pastor, I've worked with many couples where one said that the relationship would just be fine if their partner would just change the way that they looked, spoke, ate, laughed, and dressed. If they could just control their partner then all would be great. But we cannot control others. We cannot control how someone will respond or react to us. We cannot control how someone will accept or not accept us. We cannot control what people will think about us.

This can be so difficult for many of us, especially for the people-pleasers in the crowd. We want to be able to make people like us. We want to be loved and will do anything we can to achieve that. But we cannot.

Would that we were like the lilies where we just grow and be who we are. Would we be like the birds of the air that just fly and eat and do not worry about tomorrow or about others or about how we will be seen.

Movement 4 – Still Connected

But we are not to be isolated. We are not to be detached. I do not believe that Jesus is calling us to go off and live separate from others because we cannot control them, so why bother. He is speaking specifically of our relationship with God, and I will get to that. But first, consider one more lesson from nature that we can take. Each aspect of nature does what it will, is what it is, but not in isolation, not separate from others. Scientists have learned that trees communicate with each other. Through the network of roots, through the presence and action of mushrooms and other things that are beyond my education, trees talk to each other, warn about incoming diseases or predators or insects, and are in communication with each other. And it is not just elms and other elms, or only oaks with oaks. It is across species and types. They are connected.

Plants look for animals to connect to. Animals look to other animals for ways to live well and often support each other. Yes, nature is also brutal and some animals will take the lives of others, but there is still a way that they are connected. A lion will not kill more than it needs to and always seems to leave some for the scavengers after. Nature is connected with each other. The lilies rely on the animals for nutrients. The birds rely on the lilies for food. They are connected.

I was once on a trip into the Adirondack mountains by myself, and I was eating my supper on the bank of a slow-moving stream. Across from me, on the other side of the bank was a family of ducks. I noticed how one adult would watch while the children and the other adult would eat. And then the adults would switch. I saw the implicit trust in the children. I saw the mutual sense of responsibility in the adults. And I saw a lack of anxiety or concern for my presence. At first, I was the anxious one in their presence. While they were on the other side of the stream, they were not that far from me and I worried about how the animals might act around their children. I did not want to be nipped at, bitten, or hit by an over-protective duck. So, I was not enjoying my meal, instead keeping a close watch on the behavior of the ducks. But then I saw them eating, being careful, but also not overly worried about

me, and I thought that if they can be so relaxed, then why can't I? I relaxed and realized that I would be ok. It was from letting the ducks be, and learning from their behaviors that I was able to adjust my own. I was in a relationship with nature that taught and helped me in the moment in creation.

When I have hiked in desert canyons I have learned to never take all of the water out of a hole because there are other animals that may need it and I need to be respectful. When hiking through the high-desert in Arizona I learned that sleeping right next to a water source is not a great idea because there are many animals in the evening that want to enjoy that water as well. I need to share. I need to think of others. I learn from creation.

We need to stay connected. We need to stay connected to each other because we need each other. It is one thing to not worry about what people think about us, but we still need to care for, lean on, and help each other. This church has a wonderful legacy of supporting missions in various ways. Do you do it to gain favor with the people you are helping? No, it is because you want to stay connected, you want to help, and you know how important it is to make a positive difference in the world.

I ask the couples who want to change each other, how they can be connected differently. I ask them how they can change the ways that they are connected. It is important because we can be connected, we can be in a relationship in harmful or helpful ways. There are abusive relationships, and then there are the relationships where the individuals are encouraged to thrive. It depends on how you connect and relate. If you don't like the way that your partner is acting, what can you do differently, how can you be different? How can you change?

There are many examples in nature of abusive, parasitic relationships. That is not how we are to be connected, but in a way that is true to who we are, that trusts that we are good enough, and also allows and helps the other to flourish.

Movement 5 – The Divine

This passage is from the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus is speaking to how we are to treat each other and how we are to be in a relationship with the divine. Jesus is speaking about our relationship with money and resources, but connects it with our relationship with God, and this is where it may be the most difficult. We want to trust God, but on our terms. We want to trust that God will be with us, but only and especially in the way that will fit our image and expectation of who God is. We want to control God, to force God into a box. I know this every time someone thanks God for the good weather. Don't we realize that our good weather means bad weather for someone else? When we thank God for the good weather we are controlling God to fix the air for us and only us. This is controlling God and this is not a healthy or good relationship with God. Let God be God. Let Christ be Christ. Let the creator be the one to shape and guide and control the universe and the earth and all living things. Let Christ be the one to welcome and love and accept. Let Christ be the redeemer, the Son, the savior, and trust that it will be enough.

And be in a relationship. Trust that you are loved. Trust that God is not going to reject you. Trust that Christ is not going to cast you away. Let go and trust. Let go and be forgiven. Let go and live.

Movement 6 – Assurance of Christ

I want to leave you with an assurance, this is the assurance of Christ. I started by reminding us of the worry that we will do things right which comes out of a worry that we will be ok. We worry that we will be ok in the eyes of God and of others. Jesus is trying to help people in that worry and work with the Sermon on the Mount and calling them to look beyond the worry and anxiety of money and resources. And we try. We strive to trust God, to learn from others, and to follow the example of creation. But sometimes we do not get it. Sometimes we falter and fail. This is where we again and again look to the example of Christ. This is where we again look not only to the example, but to the assurance of Christ. The assurance that we are forgiven. The assurance that we are loved. The assurance that we are redeemed. This is the cross and the resurrection. And this assurance gives us the ability to keep trying again and again.

AMEN