

Finding Happiness

Matthew 6:24-34

Second Baptist Church, Memphis

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Josh Hamilton is quite a story. He is a Major League Baseball player playing for the Texas Rangers. He is either first or second in the American League in batting average, RBI, and home runs—so we might have two Triple Crown winners this year: Josh Hamilton and Big Brown. Hamilton also was until recently out of the league for three years because of a drug problem.

He seems to have turned his life around, and now he's having this remarkable season, and he is in talks with the Rangers about a huge contract extension. He was asked about his contract talks this week, and this is what he said:

The more I read the Bible, the more I realize it doesn't make any sense to worry. I'm not going to be able to add one day to my life by worrying. I know God will provide for my family.

He seems to know his Bible, too. At least he knows the part where Jesus said, *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?* ²⁶*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? ²⁷*And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?*

Do not worry? Really? Is this the hardest of Jesus' hard saying?

Frederick Buechner argues that to tell a person not to worry is like telling a person with allergies not to sneeze. We worry. Many of us become expert at it—capable of worrying pretty much all the time about our schedules, our appearances, our children, our health—about which we are capable of worrying that the worst that can happen will happen: the stomach pain is actually a terrible and terminal disease and the sudden headache is a brain tumor; our child is out too late, in a car accident, no doubt.

Most of us are expert worriers. And for Jesus to say, *Don't worry* seems like an impossible and almost ridiculous statement. Don't worry.

It helps to get what Jesus is saying to look at what he said leading up to this little section about worrying. What he said was, *You cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and wealth.* Then, elaborating and following up on that statement, Jesus says, *Therefore...don't worry about your possessions.*

Jesus is not just talking about worrying in general here. He's talking about worrying about your possessions, and he is

talking about the impossibility of both trusting in God and trusting in your material possessions.

Don't worry about your stuff—what you will eat, drink, wear, drive. Even that's really hard. *The New York Times* recently reported that the average American is exposed to 3,500 commercial messages every day: all of them—billboards, magazines, newspapers, television, radio, even the sides of buses—saying the same thing: *You do not have enough. Keep working, harder and harder, so you can acquire more and more.*

[John Buchanan, *Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois, November 22, 1998*]

It is to that mentality that Jesus is speaking. It is to those of us caught on the treadmill of producing and consuming, making money fast and spending it faster, the treadmill that never slows down but always gets faster and faster, the treadmill that exhausts us, it is to those of us wearing ourselves out trying to stay on that treadmill that Jesus says:

Look at the birds of the air, they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns. Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin. Your heavenly father knows what you need. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these other things will be given to you as well.

It seems that Jesus points us to the birds and the lilies as examples for us because of the way they unselfconsciously

participate in the life of God which is always pouring forth through all creation. Worrying about stuff blocks that participation, which is why we humans so often feel distant and disconnected from God.

Fear closes up our hearts. Worry puts up a barricade to grace. The birds and the lilies have lessons to teach us about being unobstructed channels for the flow of God's grace.

[“Living by the Word,” *The Christian Century, May 20, 2008*]

We tend to think our many possessions and our corresponding anxiety over them is a modern phenomenon, but back in 1885 the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy wrote a story about this.

It is a story about a wealthy couple named the Ilyases. They were prosperous in every way. The people of their village said about him:

Ilyás is a fortunate man: he has plenty of everything. This world must be a pleasant place for him.

People of position heard of Ilyás and sought his acquaintance. Visitors came to him from afar; and he welcomed every one, and gave them food and drink.

Ilyás had three children: two sons and a daughter; and he married them all off. While he was poor, his sons worked with him, and looked after the flocks and herds themselves; but when he grew rich they got spoiled and one of them developed a drinking problem. The eldest was killed in a brawl; and the

younger ceased to obey his father, and they could not live together any more.

Over the course of a series of unfortunate events, the Ilyases lost everything; till, by the time he was seventy years old, he had begun to sell his furs, carpets, saddles, and tents. At last he had to part with his remaining cattle, and found himself face to face with want.

Before he knew how it had happened, he had lost everything, and in their old age he and his wife had to try to find a way to support themselves. Ilyás had nothing left, except the clothes on his back and his wife, Sham-Shemagi, who also was old by this time. The son who had parted from him had gone into a far country, and his daughter was dead, so that there was no one to help the old couple.

Their neighbor, Muhammad-Shah, took pity on them. Muhammad-Shah was neither rich nor poor, but lived comfortably, and was a good man. He remembered Ilyás's hospitality, and pitying him, said:

Come and live with me, Ilyás, you and your old woman. In summer you can work in my melon-garden as much as your strength allows, and in winter feed my cattle; and Sham-Shemagi shall milk my mares and make kumiss. I will feed and clothe you both. When you need anything, tell me, and you shall have it.

Ilyás thanked his neighbor, and he and his wife took this position with Muhammad-Shah as laborers. At first the position seemed hard to them, but they got used to it, and lived on, working as much as their strength allowed.

Muhammad-Shah found it was to his advantage to keep such people, because, having been masters themselves, they knew how to manage and were not lazy, but did all the work they could. Yet it grieved Muhammad-Shah to see people brought so low who had been of such high standing.

It happened once that some of Muhammad-Shah's relatives came from a great distance to visit him, and a Mullah (a clergy person) came too. Muhammad-Shah told Ilyás to catch a sheep and kill it. Ilyás skinned the sheep, and boiled it, and sent it in to the guests. The guests ate the mutton, had some tea, and then began drinking kumiss.

As they were sitting with their host on down cushions on a carpet, conversing and sipping kumiss from their cups, Ilyás, having finished his work passed by the open door. Muhammad-Shah, seeing him pass, said to one of the guests:

Did you notice that old man who passed just now?

Yes, said the visitor, what is there remarkable about him?

Only this—that he was once the richest man among us, replied the host. His name is Ilyás. You may have heard of him.

Of course I have heard of him, the guest answered. I never saw him before, but his fame has spread far and wide.

Yes, and now he has nothing left, said Muhammad-Shah, and he lives with me as my laborer, and his old woman is here too—she milks the mares.

The guest was astonished: he clicked with his tongue, shook his head, and said: *Fortune turns like a wheel. One man it lifts, another it sets down! Does not the old man grieve over all he has lost?*

Who can tell. He lives quietly and peacefully, and works well.

May I speak to him? asked the guest. *I should like to ask him about his life.*

Why not? replied the master, and he called Ilyas. *Old man, come in and have a cup of kumiss with us, and call your wife here also.*

Ilyás entered with his wife; and after exchanging greetings with his master and the guests, he repeated a prayer, and seated himself near the door. His wife passed in behind the curtain and sat down with her mistress.

A cup of kumiss was handed to Ilyás; he wished the guests and his master good health, bowed, drank a little, and put down the cup.

Well, old man, said the guest who had wished to speak to him, I suppose you feel rather sad at the sight of us. It must remind you of your former prosperity, and of your present sorrows.

Ilyás smiled, and said:

If I were to tell you what is happiness and what is misfortune, you would not believe me. You had better ask my wife. What is in her heart is on her tongue. She will tell you the whole truth.

The guest turned towards the curtain. *Well, old woman, he said, tell me how your former happiness compares with your present misfortune.*

And Sham-Shemagi answered from behind the curtain:

This is what I think about it: My old man and I lived for fifty years seeking happiness and not finding it; and it is only now, these last two years, since we had nothing left and have lived as laborers, that we have found real happiness, and we wish for nothing better than our present lot.

The guests were astonished, and so was the master; he even rose and drew the curtain back, so as to see the old woman's face. There she stood with her arms folded, looking at her old husband, and smiling; and he smiled back at her.

The old woman went on:

I speak the truth and do not jest. For half a century we sought for happiness, and as long as we were rich we never found it. Now that we have nothing left, and have taken service as

laborers, we have found such happiness that we want nothing better.

But in what does your happiness consist? asked the guest.

Why, in this, she replied, when we were rich my husband and I had so many cares that we had no time to talk to one another, or to think of our souls, or to pray to God. We had visitors and had to consider what food to set before them and what presents to give them, lest they should speak ill of us.

When they left, we had to look after our laborers who were always trying to shirk work and get the best food, while we wanted to get all we could out of them. So we sinned. Then we were in fear lest a wolf should kill a foal or a calf, or thieves steal our horses. We lay awake at night, worrying lest the ewes should overlie their lambs, and we got up again and again to see that all was well.

One thing attended to, another care would spring up: how, for instance, to get enough fodder for the winter. And besides that, my old man and I used to disagree. He would say we must do so and so, and I would differ from him; and then we disputed – sinning again. So we passed from one trouble to another, from one sin to another, and found no happiness.

Well, and now?

Now, when my husband and I wake in the morning, we always have a loving word for one another and we live peacefully, having nothing to quarrel about. We have no care but how best to serve our master. We work as much as our strength allows and do it with a will that our master may not lose but profit by us.

When we come in, dinner or supper is ready and there is kumiss to drink. We have fuel to burn when it is cold and we have our fur cloak. And we have time to talk, time to think of our souls, and time to pray. For fifty years we sought happiness, but only now at last have we found it.

The guests laughed.

But Ilyás said:

Do not laugh, friends. It is not a matter for jesting—it is the truth of life. We also were foolish at first and wept at the loss of our wealth; but now God has shown us the truth, and we tell it, not for our own consolation, but for your good.

And the Mullah said:

That is a wise speech. Ilyás has spoken the exact truth. The same is said in Holy Writ.

And the guests ceased laughing and became thoughtful.