

As you know we're in the midst of a series on Treasure. Two weeks ago as we looked at Jesus' temptation in the wilderness we reflected on what things we're tempted to worship instead of God. As we entered the season of Lent we asked the question, "What do we need to give up in order to make more room for Jesus?" Last week we talked about our hearts. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. What does it look like to have hearts on fire for Jesus, beating faster for the church and God's mission? Today we'll talk about what it means to seek God's kingdom.

In the season of Lent we reflect on Jesus' coming into our midst to enter the suffering and sin of the world in order to defeat it. This morning we represent Jesus' coming near by reading the gospel from within our midst, and we turn to face the bible. Please stand and join me in singing the gospel processional.

Matt 6:25 "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? 28 And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30 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? 31 Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" 32 For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

This is the word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God!**

Our passage opens with Jesus telling us, "Don't worry!" He instructs us not to worry about some things that happen to be near and dear to our hearts. Don't worry about eating, drinking, or clothes. Interesting that Jesus says not to lose sleep worrying about things that are so completely essential to our survival, things we simply can't live without. And yet Jesus blithely says, "Don't worry about those."

The problem is most of us DO worry about those things. But we're worried with good reason. Humans can only survive 40 days tops without food. Those of us practicing occasional fasting during Lent, be encouraged – we can do this! Missing a meal here and there won't kill us. But we can only survive 3-5 days without water. So it's natural for us to worry about what we'll eat or drink.

In fact, we're hard-wired to do so. Even my one year old daughter demonstrates this truth all the time. Those of you who know how grumpy I get without food will not be surprised by this. Anne has never missed a meal even once in her short 15 months of life. And yet, when she sees her plate just starting to approach being empty – even if she's already got her chipmunk cheeks stuffed full of food – she gets this very concerned look on her face, starts to panic, cry, and point for more food! I guess it's a natural born survival instinct to worry about having enough food.

And yet Jesus says over and over don't worry about such things. His justification for not worrying is to simply look and see God's provision all around us. The birds of the air? They don't fret about their meals. God's got it covered – all you can eat worms and critters for every bird! Incidentally, my mom still hasn't quite learned to trust God for that. She's convinced the birds in her back yard won't survive without her stocking the bird feeders. Consequently, she's also got the happiest and fattest squirrels you've ever seen hanging around her back door. I counted 17 of them once having a party. But I digress. The point is – God takes care of the birds, with or without my mom's help. Jesus says, "Don't worry, you're more valuable than they are. God will take care of you, too."

He goes on to say it's no use worrying anyway since it doesn't add even a single hour to your life. Turns out it probably takes hours away. Studies show you can lose as much as four to eight years of your life when you worry too much.¹ Even mild anxiety can make you significantly more prone to various life threatening conditions such as cancer, strokes, or heart problems.² Are you more worried now?

Don't worry, Jesus says. Well, that sounds just fine. And many of us here today do have the luxury of not worrying about how we're going to get our next meal. But not all of us. And certainly not all of our neighbors. I've heard it said that right here in Watauga County 25% of children don't have enough food. One of every four kids goes hungry on a regular basis. What do you imagine those kids and those families think when they hear Jesus say, "Don't worry"?

I confess it was a challenge to read and reflect on this scripture in light of my recent trip to Guatemala. As you know our church has had an ongoing relationship with the people of Chichicastenango and Patzibal, Guatemala for over a decade now. We've helped build churches there and we've been providing scholarships for children to attend school. Our church's partnership is a beautiful way to make a real difference in many people's lives. But one of the reasons we're able to make such an impact there is because the need is so great. Just to give you an idea, the average family income is just over \$1000 per year.

So Jesus says don't worry about what to eat. How does that preach in Patzibal, a place where there just isn't much real food anywhere to be found? Fruits and vegetables, although they're for sale at the local market, they're just too expensive for the average family to buy. And so the streets are littered with candy wrappers and empty bags of chips. These unhealthy processed junk foods are all that some families can afford. And they're available in abundance on every single street corner.

Jesus says don't worry about what to drink. In Patzibal most families have little or no access to clean water. What little water they do have they use for cooking and washing clothes, not for drinking. Besides, it's cheaper to buy soda anyway. I saw ads for Pepsi on every other building there, and most of the delivery trucks I saw were loaded down with crates of soda bottles. Because of all the Pepsi and junk food, many of the locals end up with fewer teeth and higher rates of diabetes and other health problems.

Jesus says don't worry about what to wear. Now for me personally, that's not one I spend a lot of time worrying about. In my closet I've got plenty of clothes that are old enough to have driver's licenses. But the people of Patzibal do have to worry about clothes because they have so few of them. In fact, I saw a

¹ http://www.naturalnews.com/036730_stress_DNA_damage_life_span.html

² <http://theweek.com/article/index/231460/could-even-mild-anxiety-shorten-your-life>

lot of clothes with logos from restaurants and businesses here in Boone. Leftovers from our previous trips years ago, but still in use because that's all the people have.

So our brothers and sisters in Patzibal obviously have plenty of good reasons to worry about what to eat, drink, and wear. So how do they hear and understand this scripture? Don't worry? How is that even possible? How can people with so few resources not be worried about providing for themselves and their families on just a few dollars a day?

To be honest, I really don't know. I'd be curious to ask them if I get the chance to return. However I do know what the rest of the passage says. In verse 33³, Jesus provides the antidote to worrying: "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

One of the many joys of a foreign mission trip is being able to worship in another culture. There's always more to learn about God, God's people, and God's kingdom. It was during some of these worship times that we experienced what it meant for our Guatemalan friends to seek first God's kingdom. One group member put it this way:

"Although there were many sights and sounds that brought 'pause' during our mission efforts in Guatemala, one of the happenings that brought tears to my eyes was the prayer time led by two different ministers in two different churches. Not only did the ministers offer up prayers for all, but the congregation prayed with them simultaneously and offered their petitions at the same time, creating a symphony of languages and tones, and joyfulness as well as reverence."⁴

Jesus tells us not to worry but to seek God's kingdom. And our Guatemalan friends seem more than happy to obey. Although paying bills and providing for family is a constant struggle, you would never guess it by interacting with them. On the contrary, they're quick to smile and their hearts are overflowing with joy and gratitude to God. That joy radiates in their worship and prayer. Surely it must have something to do with seeking first God's kingdom.

Our relationship with the church in Patzibal has been a tremendous blessing to our church. And God has blessed us to be a blessing.

Boone UMC currently partners with an organization to provide scholarships for nearly 100 children to attend school in Patzibal. These kids would have no chance at an education without our support. Providing scholarships builds God's kingdom in at least two ways. First, it allows families to not worry about paying for education, freeing up more resources to buy necessities like food and clothes. Second, in a place where most villagers never complete the third grade, these scholarships give children a chance to break out of the cycle of abject poverty by finishing school and getting a decent job.

When the Church – capital C – Christians throughout the world, including us here at Boone UMC – when the Church seeks God first, the kingdom of God breaks out as the needs of God's people are met. Relieving worry, providing necessities, and breaking the chains of poverty are all signs of God's kingdom expanding. When we give to Faith Promise and Boone UMC missions, we're supporting this kingdom

³ On screen please

⁴ From Lily

work. When we seek first God's kingdom, it empowers others to experience the kingdom as well. We are blessed to be a blessing.

Most of us here don't worry about where our next meal will come from, but we do worry. A lot. And our worry distracts us from seeking God first. It's easy to be consumed and overwhelmed by anxiety. It's easy to get caught up pursuing other treasures instead of God's kingdom. It's easy to seek the wrong things first, to fill our hearts with everything but Jesus. So how do we stay focused on seeking God?

Like our Guatemalan friends, it has to start with a vibrant prayer life. We can't build trust in God without spending time in God's presence. And I'll be the first to admit, it's not easy making time to do that. And let's face it – our culture doesn't exactly promote the values of stillness and reflection. We're constantly bombarded with more to do. We're told we're only worth as much as we can produce, and so we're always looking for ways to get more done. It doesn't feel like we're getting anything done when we're taking time to sit and reflect in God's presence. And yet God tells us to seek first the kingdom and all the rest will work itself out.

My wife and I have been talking about our busyness a lot lately. God has really put it on Carrie's heart to try to provide space for people to pray. So this summer, we'll be leading a class on prayer during the Sunday School hour. It'll be an 8-10 week course, and each week we'll briefly introduce a new spiritual discipline to help us learn how to seek God. But the class isn't nearly as much about content as it is about practice. The most important thing we're trying to do is provide space for people to pray and seek God's presence without any distractions, even for just an hour a week. We're looking to kick off the class in June, so look for more info in the coming weeks.

But no matter how much we learn and practice seeking God's presence, no matter how much time we commit to solitude and prayer, we're still going to falter. Our relationship with God will ebb and flow. We'll experience mountaintops and valleys. We're human, and we won't always get it right. But that's ok because God is patient and gracious with us. And that's good news.

But here's even better news: GOD. SEEKS. FIRST. Regardless of whether we're seeking God, God is always seeking after us. And it's been that way from the beginning. In the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve take a bite from the forbidden tree, they hide, naked and ashamed. But God walks through the garden gently calling out to them, "Where are you?"⁵ God takes the initiative to restore the broken relationship. When we disobey, God reconciles. God seeks after us.

When the Israelites are enslaved in Egypt, God hears their cries and comes near. God seeks out and covenants with his people. He tells them "I will be with you!"⁶ and he leads them to the promised land in spite of their fickle hearts and idolatrous ways. When our love fails, God's love remains steadfast. God seeks after us.

When the prophet Elijah is at the end of his rope, exhausted and afraid for his life, hovering in a dark secluded cave and wishing he were dead, God comes near. God seeks out Elijah and finds him, and in a still small voice God asks him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"⁷ God comforts Elijah and assures him that he's not alone. When we despair, God restores. God seeks after us.

⁵ Genesis 3:9

⁶ Exodus 3:7-12; 6:7

⁷ 1 Kings 19:13

And of course in Jesus we find the ultimate expression of God coming near to seek after us. God in Jesus gives up the glory of heaven, takes on human flesh, and enters into our suffering and death in order to overcome and defeat it on our behalf. In John's gospel when Jesus first meets the men who were to become his disciples, Jesus asks them, "What are you looking for?"⁸ What are you looking for? They don't really know it yet, but the answer is Jesus!

When Jesus' followers are hungry he tells them, "I am the bread of life."⁹ When Jesus' friends are mourning the loss of their brother Lazarus, Jesus assures them, "I am the resurrection and the life."¹⁰ When the disciples confess they don't know the way to where he is going, Jesus tells them, "I am the way and the truth and the life."¹¹ What are you looking for? Seek Jesus! After all, that's what Jesus came to do for us. He tells Zacchaeus, "I have come to seek and save the lost."¹² Jesus came near to seek and to save. God seeks after us.

Seeking leads to joy. It's true for us, as we talked about already with our friends in Guatemala. But seeking also brings God joy. Seeking us and restoring us into right relationship brings God joy. In the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son, Jesus tells us there is great joy in heaven when the lost are restored into right relationship with God.¹³ Seeking leads to joy.

God is still seeking us today. We are God's treasure, and God never gives up seeking after us, even when we're not seeking God. When we're seeking to fill our hearts with WHATEVER instead of Jesus, God still seeks after us. When we're disobedient like Adam and Eve, God gently calls to us, "Where are you?" When we're exhausted like Elijah and we just feel like giving up and hiding in a cave, God finds us and whispers, "What are you doing here?" and assures us "You are not alone." Like Jesus' first disciples, Jesus asks us still today, "What are you looking for?" And as we seek answers Jesus shows us how he is the answer to whatever it is we're seeking.

As you know we're in the midst of Lent, which is a season of seeking. It's a season of setting aside time to reflect on who we are and what we're doing in response to God's mercy and grace. It's a season of turning away from all the things that get in the way of our seeking God and repenting of them. I think the questions God asks of Adam and Eve, Elijah, and the first disciples are a great place for us to start in our reflection time.¹⁴ Where are you? What are you doing here? What are you looking for?

As you seek answers to those questions, may you find joy in seeking. As you seek may you find Jesus, the one who is always seeking after us and providing us with everything we will ever need. Amen.

Benediction: Go as God's people, asking, seeking, and finding joy as you are found in Jesus.

⁸ John 1:38

⁹ John 6:35

¹⁰ John 11:25

¹¹ John 14:6

¹² Luke 19:10

¹³ Luke 15

¹⁴ All three questions on screen please