

LEARNING THE WAY:

A series on the Sermon on the Mount

“This is the Day”

Joshua 24.1-2a, 14-15 and Matthew 6:24-34

Covenant Presbyterian Church

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Rev. Charlie Berthoud

“Choose this day whom you will serve.” Joshua spoke bluntly to the people of God after they had entered into the Promised Land, freed from slavery. He made it very clear to the people that they had choices about who or what would be most important to them.

Jesus also makes it clear that people have choices. He began his ministry by proclaiming the Kingdom of God, inviting people to repent, to turn around, to change direction. He invited them to choose to live in this new reality, to live with new priorities and purpose. It’s as if he is saying “Choose this day if you are going to follow me and live as part of God’s Kingdom.”

In our reading from the Sermon on the Mount from last week, Jesus had words of caution: Beware of doing your good deeds or your prayer to be seen by others. This week he also has words of caution—telling his followers to choose wisely about who or what they follow and encouraging them to not worry. Listen for the teaching of Jesus.

²⁴ “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

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.

It's a cold winter day, so it seems like a good day to think about ice cream!

Let's pretend it's a hot, humid summer day, and let's pretend we're driving in a remote area, and the car runs out of gas, when we're about a mile away from a gas station. We walk to the gas station to get a gallon of gas. We are hot and sweaty and tired. We notice that they have a small food section, with a small freezer. Inside the freezer are little cups of ice cream. Just enough for all of us. We are overjoyed. And it's all vanilla. We love it. It is delicious.

Fast forward to a week later, and it's still hot and humid. We're inside an air conditioned ice cream shop. They have dozens of flavors, but we can't find our favorites. No pistachio almond fudge? No raspberry chocolate cheesecake? No sea salt caramel swirl with toffee? What is the world coming to?

Maybe ice cream isn't your thing, but we all are picky and fussy about something....coffee, or clothes, or cars, or kitchen counter tops. It has to be just right, or else we're not happy.

We have so many choices in our lives, we have so many options—with ice cream and everything else. You would think we would be overjoyed. But it seems that the more choices we have, the more options we have, the more we complain and the more we feel like we're missing out on something, the more discontented we become.

When I was little, I heard "old people" talk about growing up in the Depression and rejoicing when on Christmas Day they got an orange in their stocking.

I think I rolled my eyes when I heard those sorts of stories, but as I've journeyed through life, I've come to appreciate those who have lived with deprivation and learned to appreciate simple blessings.

I was fortunate enough to spend a year in Nicaragua in the mid-1980s, when things were kind of chaotic and only the most basic things were available. In the small northern Nicaraguan village where I spent a lot of time, we used to joke about the wonderful variety of our meals: we'd have rice and beans for breakfast, beans and rice for lunch, and leftovers for dinner.

In that village about every week or so, a truck would arrive with supplies for the local store. A bottle of warm Coke and a packet or two of crackers made me very happy.

And to this day, 30 years later, I find myself grateful for clean drinking water, something we rarely had in Nicaragua.

And yes I recognize that I probably sound like the “old people” who I used to roll my eyes at, when they talked about living through the Depression.

I am immensely grateful for that experience as it has helped me to learn and live with a core teaching of scripture, reflected in our reading today: **contentment**.

Three times in the reading Jesus says “do not worry” and he speaks specifically about clothes and food. I know there are people who don’t have easy access to clothes and food, and I imagine they hear these words differently than I do. But for me, I hear Jesus encouraging me to be content.

In our culture of abundance, it is hard to be content.

Teaching about contentment runs through Scripture.

In 1 Timothy 6.6-10, we read:

Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment... If we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil....

The Ten Commandments also teach about contentment. Remember the commandments were not a precondition for God to act to save the people from Egypt, but instead they were given after God saved the people to guide them on their way. And the Ten Commandments conclude with a warning against being obsessed with other people’s stuff. Exodus 20.17 reads:

You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Presbyterians and most Protestants have this as the tenth and final commandment. But our Lutheran and Catholic brothers and sisters apparently think coveting is a bigger problem than we do.

In the numbering of the commandments in the Lutheran and Catholic traditions, they merge what we count as one and two and they separate what we count as ten. So for them, the final two commandments are:

9. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey.

10. You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.

In our culture today, we are conditioned to covet, to lust after, to obsess about other people's stuff. We too easily become people who want more and more and more and essentially are never happy. More clothes, more variety of food, more stuff for our houses, bigger houses to hold our stuff, and on it goes.

Tonight during the Super Bowl—for those who watch, even though the Packers aren't there—there will be lots of clever ads. We enjoy those ads. Companies are spending millions of dollars in the preparation and presentation of those ads, not to entertain us, but essentially to tell you that your car isn't good enough, your house isn't good enough, your food isn't good enough and you need more, more, and more.

So as you're watching the game tonight, or next time you see an ad, let me encourage you to talk back to the ad.

You could say:

No thank you. I don't need a bigger TV or a fancier computer.

I appreciate your suggestion, but my car is just fine.

If I eat too much of your snack food, I will become dangerously unhealthy.

Do you really think if I drink your beer I will be surrounded by young and sexy people—and is that really the most important thing?

If you are at a Super Bowl party or with lots of people tonight, you probably don't want to talk back at every commercial....

The point is to not let the ads monopolize the conversation. Talk back and resist as needed. Don't let the ads, or the idea of "keeping up with the Joneses" make you discontented with your life.

Yes, there is a time for a new car, new technology, and new clothes. Restaurant meals and snack foods and beer are ok in moderation. But we have to be careful. We list to a lot of ads. As Christians need to listen to Jesus.

Listen again to Jesus' words in Matthew 6, according to *The Message*:

What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with *getting*, so you can respond to God's *giving*. People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions.

Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.

Jesus is inviting us to live in the present, to make the most of today, of right now. We are called to recognize the blessings all around us, and to know that when we face challenges, we're not alone.

One of my favorite verses in the Bible is Psalm 118.24, and I wonder if Jesus had it in mind when he taught his disciples to not worry and seek God's kingdom first.

This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

This is the day God has given us.

This is the day to rejoice in being alive.

This is the day to love our neighbors and help one another along the way.

This is the day to enjoy simple pleasures, like good music, energetic children, and vanilla ice cream.

This is the day to share a meal together, a day to be renewed in purpose and hope.

Amen.