

Christ Church UM

21 June 2015

Storytelling 101: Lilies of the Field

Matthew 6:24_34 Common English Bible
(CEB)

24 No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and [privilege].

25 “Therefore, I say to you, don’t worry about your life, what you’ll eat or what you’ll drink, or about your body, what you’ll wear. Isn’t life more than food and the body more than clothes? 26 Look at the birds in the sky. They don’t sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren’t you worth much more than they are? 27 Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life? 28 And why do you worry about clothes? Notice how the lilies in the field grow. They don’t wear themselves out with work, and they don’t spin cloth. 29 But I say to you that even Solomon in all of his splendor wasn’t dressed like one of these. 30 If God dresses grass in the field so beautifully, even though it’s alive today and tomorrow it’s thrown into the furnace, won’t God do much more for you, you people of weak faith? 31 Therefore, don’t worry and say, ‘What are we going to eat?’ or ‘What are we going to drink?’ or ‘What are we going to wear?’ 32 Gentiles long for all these things. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them. 33 Instead, desire first and foremost God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

The Message

24 “You can’t worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you’ll end up hating the other. Adoration of one feeds contempt for the other. You can’t worship God and Money both.

25_26 “If you decide for God, living a life of God_worship, it follows that you don’t fuss about what’s on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the birds, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, careless in the care of God. And you count far more to him than birds.

27_29 “Has anyone by fussing in front of the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? All this time and money wasted on fashion—do you think it makes that much difference? Instead of looking at the fashions, walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They never primp or shop, but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best_dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them.

30_33 “If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers—most of which are never even seen—don’t you think he’ll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you? 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.

34 Therefore, stop worrying about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

34 "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.

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Several weeks ago I decided to do a series on storytelling... and more specifically the parables.... the ways that Jesus used images from nature and the life his listeners' knew to bring home a message.

Well, pretty clearly, the message of our "lilies of the field" scripture is don't worry. If God takes care of the birds and the plants.... surely won't God take care of us. Don't worry.... but we do worry, and we sometimes have reason for concern.

Now, I'd also be the first to admit that some of my worries are misguided. I really don't have power over other people's choices. Their lives are theirs. My worry keeps me up nights and makes me anxious and troubled, but these worries rarely solve anything.

Also if we're not careful in our interpretation, our scripture can leave us with the impression that *all* we need to do is trust God, have a little faith.... even as tiny as mustard seed, and all will be well. We will be taken care of.

Members of Emanuel AME church were having their Wednesday night Bible study when a young man entered and sat down with them. They welcomed him and he stayed for about an hour. Then he opened fire. Our churches are called sanctuaries... safe havens. Places where we often feel we're on protected, holy ground. Why worry here. How very tragic that they were not protected.

I have been awed and deeply touched by the responses of the family members who lost loved ones at Emanuel AME church. They are grieving with deep pain for the loss of their loved ones, but at least some of them have said to the young man who killed their loved ones, "I forgive you. And may God have mercy on you." I pray that I could have such faith in God's love and care and respond like this if confronted with a similar situation.

We here in this room have varied experiences. Some of us may have lived with prejudice and have real reason for fear. I know that I have lived mostly a life of privilege. I have a very dear African American friend who is very nearly my age. We share the times in some ways, but our life experiences have been radically different. Actually, I am in awe of her... her love and acceptance and wisdom and forgiveness. Her very difficult life taught her so much... I've learned lots too, but by comparison, I have had much easier privileges and possibilities given to me!

I share this poem-prayer call "For My People" by Margaret Walker (attached at the end of this message)

Our scripture from Matthew is saying God will provide, but as with so many other experiences we have, I have come to learn, that we must do the footwork.... we must make choices that help the spirit of God get through to us.

Coincidentally, this week's tragedy has come right before Juneteenth. There is there a message of hope and possibility.... if we all work toward it.

On June 19, 1865, federal troops under the command of Union Major General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston, Texas with a very important message: "all slaves are free."

It was not until two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect in 1863 that the estimated quarter of million slaves in Texas received word that they were free and entitled to payment for their labor. This memorable day in history is celebrated as African American Freedom Day, or Juneteenth.

Now 150 years later, Juneteenth is commemorated across the country with parades, festivals, family activities, and worship services, reminding all of us that freedom was long sought and should not be taken for granted.

Edna Reeves, member of Warren United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas, recalls attending Juneteenth festivities as a child. In the early 1950s, her father's workplace would close in observation of the holiday and sponsor a day of celebration at a

local park. Juneteenth has special meaning for her family: her great_great_grandfather was freed in Texas. “He was 15 years old when freedom came,” she said.

Goodsell United Methodist Church in Lanett, Alabama, also collaborates with various civic organizations and churches to plan the city’s Juneteenth celebration. The Rev. Dr. Randy Kelley, Pastor of Goodsell United Methodist Church says, “Juneteenth is a sacred celebration culturally and religiously. ...We look at the past to leap forward.” He also reminds us that John Wesley was an ardent abolitionist, leading many slaves to follow Methodist tradition. Goodsell United Methodist Church was founded in 1866 by freed slaves who “hit the ground running. They were interested in God and education...a way to spiritual and social uplifting,” said Dr. Kelley.

“[Juneteenth] has developed a sense of unity, pride, and community among African Americans,” said Cliff Dobbins, a member of McMillan United Methodist Church in Ft. Worth, Texas. Dobbins took his children, and now takes his grandchildren, to Ft. Worth’s festivities to teach them about the holiday’s history. “It’s a time to celebrate the day our ancestors were completely released and freed from slavery.” (By Laura Buchanan June 18, 2015)

How encouraging... and yet, how timely and sad. We have made progress. There is good news. I truly believe there are more caring, open, thoughtful people than not. Many multi-cultural congregations exist today. Folks have friendships that go across cultural lines.

But there is still much to be done and it is important not to ignore or forget that the struggle still continues in our midst. Far more African Americans are in jail and prison. Too many still see others who are different than themselves as less than.

Using the interpretation of the Message, our scripture this morning closes with some guidance.... in addition to avoiding have two masters....Like God and privilege...

Do 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 God works. Steep your life in God_reality, God_initiative, God_provisions. Don't worry about missing out.

34 "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.

We don't have some kind of magic protective shield that keeps us from harm. Bad things, difficult things happen. But we can "Steep our life in God_reality, God_initiative, God_provisions....Give our entire attention to what God is doing right now... [we can trust that] God will help us deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes."

Shockingly, the family members of those who lost loved ones at Emanuel AME seem to have deep, abiding trust that God will hold them up.

When will a new world arise? When will we finally live in harmony and share what God provides? What are we called to do in the face of ongoing racially motivated tragedy and oppression? How can we be examples of kindness and justice and love and acceptance?

I heard the powerful message from the prophet Amos 5: 24 - "Let justice roll on like a mighty river, righteousness like a ever_flowng stream!

This is really in our hands friends.... we must act for God's sake.... for our brothers and sisters' sakes.

In solidarity, let us sing together the African American National Anthem, "Lift every Voice and Sing."

For My People

BY MARGARET WALKER

For my people everywhere singing their slave songs
repeatedly: their dirges and their ditties and their blues
and jubilees, praying their prayers nightly to an
unknown god, bending their knees humbly to an
unseen power;

For my people lending their strength to the years, to the
gone years and the now years and the maybe years,
washing ironing cooking scrubbing sewing mending
hoeing plowing digging planting pruning patching
dragging along never gaining never reaping never
knowing and never understanding;

For my playmates in the clay and dust and sand of Alabama
backyards playing baptizing and preaching and doctor
and jail and soldier and school and mama and cooking
and playhouse and concert and store and hair and
Miss Choomby and company;

For the cramped bewildered years we went to school to learn
to know the reasons why and the answers to and the
people who and the places where and the days when, in
memory of the bitter hours when we discovered we
were black and poor and small and different and nobody
cared and nobody wondered and nobody understood;

For the boys and girls who grew in spite of these things to
be man and woman, to laugh and dance and sing and
play and drink their wine and religion and success, to
marry their playmates and bear children and then die
of consumption and anemia and lynching;

For my people thronging 47th Street in Chicago and Lenox
Avenue in New York and Rampart Street in New
Orleans, lost disinherited dispossessed and happy
people filling the cabarets and taverns and other

people's pockets and needing bread and shoes and milk and
land and money and something—something all our own;

For my people walking blindly spreading joy, losing time
being lazy, sleeping when hungry, shouting when
burdened, drinking when hopeless, tied, and shackled
and tangled among ourselves by the unseen creatures
who tower over us omnisciently and laugh;

For my people blundering and groping and floundering in
the dark of churches and schools and clubs
and societies, associations and councils and committees and
conventions, distressed and disturbed and deceived and
devoured by money_hungry glory_craving leeches,
preyed on by facile force of state and fad and novelty, by
false prophet and holy believer;

For my people standing staring trying to fashion a better way
from confusion, from hypocrisy and misunderstanding,
trying to fashion a world that will hold all the people,
all the faces, all the adams and eves and their countless generations;

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a
bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second
generation full of courage issue forth; let a people
loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of
healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing
in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs
be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men now
rise and take control.

Margaret Walker, "For My People" from *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems*.

Closing prayer for fathers

Loving and Merciful God, whose power is beyond our scope and whose wisdom is beyond our understanding, we turn to you in faith assured that you know our every emotion and are aware of our every need. Our thoughts and prayers today are turned towards our fathers.

For those whose fathers have increased the joy in their lives, we give you thanks.

For those whose father's presence is greatly missed may we take time to gratefully recall all they have given to us, providing for us in our growing.

For those who have recently lost or who are facing the imminent loss of their own fathers, may they find comfort in their grief, hope in their despair, courage in the love that their fathers have given them.

We give thanks, God, for those good men who sustain and support us in our living, who love us no matter what! What a blessing they are to all who know them!

We give thanks to you, O God, for all those whose gift for fatherhood is so strong that they have allowed their caring to spill over into the lives of others providing the guidance and stability, the nurture and the love needed.

How distressing it is for us to consider that not all fathers have been good fathers. We pray, compassionate God, for those whose father has been a source of hurt and pain, for all those for whom one or more members of their family has caused them to suffer. May their wounds be healed. May they find in you, in us, in others, the nurturing, sustaining love that is needed for their growth and well-being.

We recall with sadness fathers who are separated from their children through life choices made by them or others. Give them the insight and wisdom, the courage and perseverance to parent in whatever creative and life-giving ways are open to them. Give them the courage to make the decisions, which allow their children to prevail.

We remember before you single fathers and mothers who struggle to be both parents to their children __to provide all the emotional, physical and spiritual needs without the constant support of a spouse. May they find the strength, the

courage and wisdom for their task.

We pray for those fathers whose relationships with their children have been difficult or disappointing. We pray, too, for those who have been denied a chance to be fathers, and for those whose years of parenting have been cut short by the loss of a child. We turn to You, most holy God, knowing, trusting that you can console where consolation seems impossible. May they receive comfort for their soul and peace and hope for living, that their gifts may not be denied to others.

Finally, O God, we rejoice with you, at the many fine men, who have taken their place as fathers with open hearts, with willingness and joy.

And we join all fathers everywhere in praying that their children may be well and happy, a source of joy for years to come.

Hear our prayers this day, O God, and give to us such assurance of your love that your love may spill from us into the lives of others.

Amen.

Rev Jenny Sprong in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa has shared this beautiful prayer.

__Clementa Pinckney, 41, the primary pastor who also served as a state senator. We remember those who died at Emanuel AME in Charleston, SC

__Cynthia Hurd, 54, St. Andrews regional branch manager for the Charleston County Public Library system.

__Sharonda Coleman_Singleton, 45, a church pastor, speech therapist and coach of the girls' track and field team at Goose Creek High School.

__Tywanza Sanders, 26, who had a degree in business administration from Allen University.

__Ethel Lance, 70, a retired Gilliard Center employee who has worked recently as a church janitor.

__Susie Jackson, 87, Lance's cousin who was a longtime church member.

__DePayne Middleton_Doctor, 49, a pastor who retired in 2005 as Charleston

County director of the Community Development Block Grant Program.

__Myra Thompson, 59, a pastor at the church.

__Daniel Simmons Sr., 74, a pastor, who died in a hospital operating room.