

Matthew 6:19-7:12 "Toiling and Spinning"

We're in week number five of Lent this year. One of the things I failed to mention when we started out this season was how spiritual disciplines fit into Lent. We observe Lent in this church because we think it's important to prepare ourselves for Easter. Although some folks see Christmas as the high Holy Day of the year for those of us who follow Jesus, I'd argue that Easter is actually more important just because the church was founded and driven by faith in the resurrected Christ. In fact, I prefer to call Easter "Resurrection Day" for that very reason. So in the weeks building up to "Resurrection Day," a lot of folks make an extra effort to set aside time to practice what the church calls "spiritual disciplines." We do this in order to help navigate our journey of faith. Jesus becomes our compass. Most people associate Lent with "giving up" something. The idea here is that if you give up something that you're especially fond of or some kind of luxury that you can live without, you'll think of Jesus. So some people give up eating meat or sweets or something like that. The idea here is if you're craving a big juicy steak, you'll pause and say, "No ... as much as I *want* to have a big ol' ribeye, I choose not to and will instead donate the money that I would have spent on that ribeye to a charity that feeds others who may not have enough food for their family. Why? Because that's what Jesus would do. And you know what? I respect that. Because not only are you giving up something for Lent, but you're taking on a something too, in this case, the discipline of charity.

Some people do quite well with this sort of observation. Those who may struggle more are the ones who give up something that they may be more ... *dependent* on than they might think. Like coffee. Folks who do this don't realize that the Lenten fast that was meant for *them* sort of unintentionally spills over into *others'* lives too. See, the idea behind a well-planned Lenten fast is that when you miss something, you stop and say, "Ah! Jesus." It's not

a good idea to do something that would cause others to say the same thing in a ... less-than-positive context.

As we continue our study of the Sermon on the Mount, we've got a passage in front of us today that goes along with Lent quite well, because Jesus is encouraging his listeners to give something up ... or maybe the better way of saying it is that he's encouraging us to let something go. And let me tell you ... this one isn't easy. In fact, it may be even harder to let go of than coffee. Jesus is asking us to let go of anxiety.

Now I want to make a disclaimer before I go any further with this. I understand that it is impossible for some people to let go of anxiety because it's something they can't help. Five percent of the population suffers from chronic anxiety caused by a chemical imbalance that affects the brain. This isn't the kind of anxiety I'm talking about this morning. What I *am* talking about is "toiling and spinning" to borrow a phrase from Jesus from this passage. A whole lot more than 5% of the population engage in "toiling and spinning." I'm talking about people who are anxious and obsessed with things like, "Am I too fat? Am I too thin? Am I climbing the corporate ladder at the right pace? Do I drive the right car to reflect my social status? Am I using the right shampoo? Am I doing the right things so that people like me? I'm talking about obsessively worrying about external things. Image-related things. As if our worry and anxiety will make us taller, or thinner, or more charming, or better dressed or more appealing. I'm talking about our self-created, counterproductive, ridiculous anxiety that makes having a healthy faith journey *really* difficult.

The kind of anxiety I'm talking about doesn't just stop at an individual level either ... it spills over into the whole community. Have you ever worked in or been a part of an organization that is toxic? Shoot, even families can be toxic. When you're in a toxic system, you've got anxiety-driven people who measure their worth

by how much power they can have over other people. The people in this toxic system can't trust anybody because everyone's out to get each other. And it's all driven by fear. See, anxiety-driven people eventually find a vulnerable person in the system to vent their anxiety upon. That's when you see bullying, scapegoating, oppression, and injustice. Then threats are made and in some cases wars are started and everything just falls apart.

Jesus had many roles. Teacher, healer, preacher, servant ... but the one thing that stands above any of his other roles is that he was an ambassador. What does an ambassador do? [Represents another country, kingdom, culture or government.] Jesus represented the reign of God even though he was right smack-dab in the middle of the kingdoms of the earth. And his job as the ambassador of God's reign was to show the people under the reign of Caesar and every other king a different way. A better way. So there was Jesus on a hillside in rural Judea addressing people who were all-too-used to living in an anxiety-driven system. And what does he do? He tells people about a kingdom that is the total opposite of an anxiety-driven system. He says that in the reign of God, justice comes first. And if we seek God's kingdom, everything we truly need will be given to us. And what example does Jesus use to illustrate this? The birds of the air and the flowers of the field.

Why do you worry so much about food or drink or matters of the body? Consider the birds of the air. Do they have to plant fields or grow wheat or build barns to store their wheat? Nope. God feeds them. And they don't worry. Does worrying about things add years to your life? Not at all. In fact, if you think about it in today's understanding of how the body works, stress and worry actually *subtract* from your life! And what about clothes? Look at those lilies over there in that field. They don't toil or spin. Yet even the great King Solomon wasn't dressed as well as these flowers. So don't worry about what you eat or what you drink or what you wear. That's the sort of thing that people who are caught

up in the toxicity of the world worry about. When you seek God's kingdom *first*, all of these things will be added to you.

Here's the other thing about the reign of God. Unlike the kingdoms of the world, God's kingdom isn't driven by this toxic, competitive, dog-eat-dog, everyone out for himself or herself principle. It's built on abundance. It's built on concern for our neighbor. It's built on blessing one another rather than oppressing one another. Under God's reign, we desire what God desires ... for all to be safe, for all to be truly alive, and to work for the common good of *all*. And all means ...? [ALL].

Here's another thing to think about. Anxious people tend to be judgmental people. We worry that someone is judging us, so we judge others which, of course, just snowballs and again ... makes a toxic environment. Then no one can relax and be themselves or feel free. Back in Genesis, the second and longer creation story that starts in chapter 2 gives us a picture of two trees. The Tree of Life which nourishes us to see the goodness in everything and everyone. Then there's the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil whose fruit we grab so that we can know and judge everything and everyone around us as good or evil. Which one of those trees did God tell Adam and Eve to stay away from? But they did it anyway. When we eat from the fruit of that tree, we begin to see the world in terms of, "us good, others bad." When God caught them eating the fruit of that tree, Adam said, "Hey, look ... I'm not the bad guy! Eve is the bad guy! She made me eat it!" And of course Eve said, "No! Don't blame me ... I'm not the bad guy! It was that daggone serpent!" And we've been pointing fingers at each other ever since. It's inherited. It's a part of our DNA now. That's one of the reasons I have a tree of life etched into my right shoulder ... to remind me to eat from the tree that promotes kindness and harmony ... not blame and judgment.

Now let me be clear. Being non-judgmental doesn't mean we stop discerning what's right and wrong. We'd be in a heap of trouble if we just went through life saying, "Oh, it's all good!" No, Jesus encourages us to knock, and seek, and find. Being non-judgmental has to do with the joke that Jesus cracked about the guy who tried to pull a splinter out of his neighbor's eye but couldn't because he had a log in his own eye. Being non-judgmental means, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets." What do we call that rule? [THE GOLDEN RULE]. Notice how the golden rule brings *others* into the equation. When we live our lives this way, we are brought to the realization that we are all connected. We are all children in the same family. We're all loved by the same Parent. We are all precious and beloved. It's in this way that Ambassador Jesus leads us out of an anxiety and judgment-driven system into a faith-sustained, grace-filled system that allows us to authentically be who we were created to be.