

“So Disconcerting”
Jeremiah 26:7-15; Acts 19:8-10, 22-28;
Luke 12:13-31

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Worry. It seems like a common human endeavor to worry. Don't you wish our worries would be enough to change everything? I am thinking about the nature of worry as we think about Jesus talking about it today. It feels to me like there are a variety of kinds of worry and how it moves through our lives. Sometimes the worry seems a little more realistic. Sometimes it feels like we're living on the edge, like things are disintegrating and there are real things to worry about.

I think a certain amount of that uncertainty Jesus would acknowledge. We live with that. It's a worry that we're engaged in because it makes us think about what comes next. Sometimes, however, I wonder if what our worrying begins to be more about is something else. Imagine a little girl hugging three good-sized dolls. She looks as if she is afraid someone will take a doll from her. Do we, too, sometimes wonder whether somebody is going to take all our dolls from us? It's not that we couldn't give up one or two, but it's simply that worry that somebody will take what I already have from me. Somehow I have to change my life in a way that means giving up something.

I think there's this progression of worry. There's this sense that I may need to give up something, and then I see somebody with a bigger fish and I worry about that. I worry about what I don't have and worry that I might need that as well.

I think it's this kind of human worry that we can begin to think about as we hear somebody like Jeremiah coming into Jerusalem. Here are the Judeans, who want to be a world power. They have this big empire coming and pressing against who they are and they don't want to change. It's interesting, if you read through Jeremiah, what it's about. It's about letting go of that ambition to be the power and don't worry about it. Make peace with these people who are coming. Change your ways, as Jeremiah says.

So what kind of reception does Jeremiah get? What kind of reception does somebody in our time get when that kind of word comes? He's pretty clear that it's possible he's going to die. Sometimes the word of God coming into our lives can be pretty disconcerting. Those folks were pretty disconcerted about what Jeremiah was saying.

If we look again at what happened in Ephesus with Paul, he is preaching about the way and people are beginning to recognize what he's saying. They begin to realize that God has come and enters into our lives through Christ and they don't need a silver statue. Paul is messing with somebody's livelihood. The silversmiths begin to realize what would happen if people really follow him and how it would mess up their lives. They get Paul in trouble because of it. There are ways in which, as the word of God enters our lives, it can be a little bit disconcerting.

As Jesus was in conversation with the crowd that had gathered and as he was teaching them the man asked him, “Make my brother give me half the inheritance.” He points to that struggle we have with the desire for more. He makes it pretty clear. He says, “Take care. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed for one’s life does not consist of the abundance of possessions.” It feels like that strikes pretty close to home for me.

I’m reminded of a guy named Adam Smith. Some of you may have heard of him. He’s sometimes thought of as the father of capitalism. Adam Smith advocated the pursuit of individual self-interest as the best way for society to distribute goods and services. That’s sometimes where we stop with thinking about what Adam Smith said. He actually went on and said that he was under no illusion that money was the source of happiness or a measure of human value. Furthermore according to Smith it is our vanity and our desire to be accepted by others that motivates us to acquire wealth and material goods. He recognized that for achieving happiness and fulfillment accumulation of wealth was ultimately a dead-end.

It’s interesting to me, however, that as we look back on someone we look to in helping us understand our economy, his encouragement to us has been translated over the years into a very simple statement, a statement that is probably well remembered from a movie called *Wall Street*. A character in *Wall Street*, Gordon Gekko, in summarizing what he thought Adam Smith was saying, proclaimed, “Greed is good.” It is that trajectory that feels like a struggle. There is an element of our society that says greed is good. But it feels to me like what it does is take me right back to what Jesus says and wonder what do we believe? For he says, “Take care. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one’s life does not consist of the abundance of possessions.” God’s word to us can be pretty disconcerting and a struggle.

I think what Jesus is doing and I think what that little exercise reminds me of is how easy it is to begin to try to build a life around recommendations that may not be helpful. I can begin to create a stairway to nowhere. I can work very hard to make something of my life that has very little meaning. It feels to me again like an invitation to come humbly and remember that Jesus has come for a reason. God’s word comes into our life. Sometimes it’s disconcerting, but it’s for a reason. It’s because we often, I think, miss the path to life. He wants to give us that path.

When we come face to face with these two suggestions—one from Gordon Gekko speaking out for a portion of our society that says greed is good, and Jesus on the other hand speaking to us about being careful about greed and recognizing that life is not about the abundance of our possessions—we have to decide who we trust. Where is our trust? Which way of thinking are we going to shake hands with and believe in?

Jesus recognizes that as human beings we’re always going to strive. So as he concludes he tells us not to worry about some of the things we do strive for but he goes on to say basically, “You’re always going to strive. You’re a human being. It’s not that you strive; it’s what you strive for. You can strive after all these things of the world and

it's not going to be helpful; however, if you strive for the kingdom of God—that is if we let him teach us how to strive for what is good, to strive to follow him—he will teach us how to strive in the world in a way that leads us into life.

I suggest a couple of things he teaches us about the way of striving. The first is justice. It's caring for and valuing others. Their lives should be able to be full and everybody should be able to enjoy the fullness of life. That's one of the strivings I think he invites us into.

The second striving is righteousness—good and healthy relationships, what I sometimes call right relationships. Another way I think he says it is to love God and to love your neighbor. He's inviting us into a way of striving.

It's our human nature to strive and he's inviting us in the way that will really lead us into fulfillment and into a life that is good. It's interesting to me to note how selfish ambition often leads to a lot of people who have nothing and a few who have a lot and oftentimes they're not very happy. But when we try to live as he calls us to be, as we care about one another, as there's that mutual caring, we actually lift each other up. Everybody's life gets better.

So as I hear again these words of Jesus, of Paul, and of Jeremiah I wonder who the prophet is in our lives. Do we have a prophet that we're listening to? Is someone or something disconcerting us, making us look again at the world in a new way? Are we wondering if God might be speaking into our lives in some way that leads us to question something?

What about an apostle in our lives? Do we have an apostle in our lives inviting us to the way, who sometimes makes us make choices about how we do things, or who may say that one way is not the way to go and the other way is? Even if we have to give up something, do we allow Jesus to be in our lives inviting us to take care about greed and to strive instead for the kingdom? Amen.