

16 February 2025

Embracing Our Weird: Weird Treasure

Matthew 6:19-34

Call to Worship, condensed from Matthew 6:19-24:

Do not store up treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal.

But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eye is healthy, you will be full of light.

But if your eye is unhealthy, you will be full of darkness.

No one can serve two masters; for you will either hate the one and love the other, or love the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve God and this world's treasures.

Up until around 1500, Europeans lived in an enchanted world. Seriously. People saw their world as filled with and largely run by unseen forces: spirits, angels, demons, ghosts, elves and fairies, witches with their spells and curses, talismans and relics and other objects that contained uncanny powers, and every sort of enchantment you can imagine. Nearly everything that happened was attributed to some spiritual or demonic influence. Atheism wasn't a thing. Everyone believed in God, and much, much more. This is still the world that millions of people around the globe live in.

But not us, in the post-Enlightenment industrialized West. Our world has been disenchanted. This happened largely as a result of advancing science, as one by one things like earthquakes and disease and birthmarks were explained as naturally occurring phenomena. But it wasn't just science: political theory dropped the idea that God ordained all earthly kings and ushered in a new age of rule by the people. Philosophers developed moral systems based on reason and mutual benefit, rather than God's laws. Even religion became less supernatural, as we developed multiple alternative forms of Christianity, turning faith into a consumer decision instead of a divine mandate. And, of course, atheism became a thing.

In this new world, we all live within what philosopher Charles Taylor calls "the Immanent Frame." (That's *immanent* with an "a," which means "in the here and now," as opposed to *transcendent*, or "otherworldly.") The Immanent Frame simply means that we all take the default position that everything that happens has a natural cause and can be explained rationally. Now, within that frame, there are variations. Some people have a *closed* frame, which means that they believe nothing exists outside the Immanent Frame. Others, like me, have an *open* frame, which means that I believe that there are realities, like God, which exist beyond the limits of scientific explanation and which sometimes act within the world in miraculous ways. That's a significant difference, but for practical purposes, everyone in the Western world operates within the Immanent Frame. Our default assumption today is that whatever happens has a natural cause.

This is, I think, both good and bad. I don't want to go back to the old world. I like science. I like antibiotics and vaccines and insulin and central heating and air travel and all those things that we have now because people looked for natural causes. But the Christian faith has a few points of tension with that perspective, too. The New Testament frequently and consistently

warns against getting too comfortable in this world. And yet our worldview – the Immanent Frame – inclines us to do just that, to seek our purpose and define our hopes entirely in earthly terms. It's just how we think. Our focus begins on the things of this world, and only then – as a sort of afterthought – do some of us think about things that are transcendent. And that's a problem. Let's pause now and pick up where we left off in the scripture we used for the call to worship. We read Matthew 6, verses 25-34.

²⁵Therefore 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? ²⁶Look 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? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But 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? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

Our usual response to this familiar passage is to throw up our hands either in disbelief or discouragement. How do we *not* worry about food and shelter and paying our bills and all the other necessities of life? Are we supposed to quit our jobs and wait for food to appear before us, like birds apparently do? You know sometimes birds die, right? And how do we not worry about tomorrow? That's how the world has ended up in the shape it's in right now! People not thinking about the future! Look at all that's going to pot all around us. If we don't look to the future and take action now, it'll just keep getting worse! Even setting aside all the things to worry about in our own country, we have wars in Europe and Africa, famine in Africa and Asia, rising totalitarian regimes in Europe and South America and Asia, and an overheating planet everywhere. "Do not worry about tomorrow" might have been all right in Jesus' day, but not today.

Well, maybe. But let me remind you what Jesus' day was like. He lived in an impoverished nation under the rule of the Roman Empire, which was known for its brutal suppression of all opposition. The Romans built great streets and highways, then lined them with crosses bearing the tortured bodies of those who had offended Rome. Every Jew of Jesus' time had walked beneath those crosses. Jesus' time was a time of desperate poverty and division, a time of anger, resentment, and a brewing revolution, which – as Jesus well knew – would result in the utter destruction of Jerusalem within a generation. By every standard I can think of, Jesus' time was more dangerous, more violent, more hopeless, and more uncertain than ours, and yet he still said, "Don't worry about tomorrow ... Today's trouble is enough for today." So what do we do with that?

My own suggestion is that we go back a few verses before the "Do not worry" passage, to the part we used as our Call to Worship today. *Lay not up treasures on earth, where moth and rust corrupt.* If we define "treasure" as "the thing that we value the most," what is your treasure?

What do you think about the most, talk about most willingly, spend the most time working toward? If that treasure is on this earth – if it corresponds to any of this world’s definitions of “success”: wealth, power, political success, fame, beauty, influence – then know that that treasure will disappoint you. It will rot. It will become corrupted. It will never achieve the glory of even the simplest of God’s creations. But if our treasure is in heaven – that is, beyond this world and this life – it will never decay. It will never disappoint. But you can’t have it both ways. You cannot serve God and this world’s treasures. You cannot find transcendent God through success in the Immanent Frame.

That doesn’t keep people from trying, though. Here in the United States a group called the New Apostolic Reformation – which is part of an extended network of groups, like the Seven-Mountain Dominionists and the Catholic Integralists, that fall loosely under the term “Christian Nationalism” – is setting out to change America from a democracy to a theocracy, run by Christians for Christians. Democracy apparently can’t be trusted anymore, because there are too many non-Christians, and you can’t give them any say. Thinking that they are serving God, these groups are seeking earthly power. It will not serve God. Even if they succeed, their victory will rot. It will be corrupted.

But at the same time, on the other end of the political spectrum (and increasingly filling my Facebook feed) are liberal Christians whose treasure appears to be just as political and just as firmly based in this world. Their entire focus these days is on political resistance to the current administration in Washington, and while I am more sympathetic to these people’s politics, I grow increasingly convinced that they, every bit as much as the Christian Nationalists they oppose, are trying to serve God by achieving earthly political success. But that effort will disappoint. Even if they succeed, their movement will be corrupted. It cannot be otherwise. There is only one treasure that does not rot.

No, I’m not saying that we should hide our heads in the ground and have nothing to do with politics or social issues. But I *am* saying that if our goals are defined completely within the sphere of politics, within the frame of this world, then we are not ultimately serving God. How, then, *are* we to serve God in times like these? Over the past few weeks I’ve been thinking a lot about a book I’ve read several times now called *The Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust*, by a colleague from my seminary teaching days named David Gushee. David traces the stories of Christians in 1930s and 40s Europe who risked (and frequently gave) their lives to hide Jewish people from the Nazis or to help them escape. Here’s what I remember from those stories. These “righteous Gentiles” were remarkably similar to each other. None of them were especially political. None of them led movements. None of them were resistance fighters. Instead, they were nearly all simple people who chose not to obey laws that contradicted their faith. They did not help the Jews so as to oppose the Nazis; they helped the Jews because they were people who needed help. They did heroic things simply because as followers of Christ they didn’t see they could do anything else. And strangest of all, they did it all so quietly and calmly, not so much *courageous* as just “not afraid.” To put it another way, they did not worry about tomorrow.

I don’t think Jesus’ call not to be anxious means we should retreat from our lives or ignore our jobs or stop working or step out of our political and social context to exist in some sort of monkish separation from the world. I think it is a reminder to make sure, before we do anything, that our treasure – our ultimate concern, our deepest desire, our motivating hope – is firmly centered beyond this world. When our treasure is in heaven (as Matthew puts it) or in God (as Luke does), then we can pursue our lives within this Immanent Frame not only with

direction, but with serenity. We reflect God not so much by our earthly goals as by the spirit in which we pursue them, not so much by our ends as by the means we choose, not so much by what we do but by how and for whom we live. When we stand on a foundation that will not be swept away by the shifting sands of this world, then we can let today's trouble be enough for today.

* * *

The French philosopher Luc Ferry writes: "It is only by positing values beyond this world that humans become truly human." Ferry is himself a secular humanist, and even he sees that when we set all our hopes, all our values, all our treasure in this world, then we are selling ourselves pathetically short. We live in stirring times in this world, as much about the world we have known is being upended suddenly, and the temptation to respond entirely within the Immanent Frame is strong. But now, more than ever, we need to make sure that our ultimate values are of the sort that do not rot, that do not decay. Now, more than ever, we need to seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and let every other action stem from that.