

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. John Aeschbury at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 3, April 26, 2009, dedicated to the glory of God!*

**“Seek Ye First”**  
**Matthew 6:25-33**

*“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?”*

*“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? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing?”*

*“Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 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?”*

*“Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”*

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

Have you ever noticed how your point of view affects what you see? I run early in the morning and there are plenty of times when I get startled by the shadows that cross the sidewalks where I run. Then, I get past it and I realize that what I thought was a person is nothing more than a branch over the path.

There are many, many times when the scriptures that we read are affected by the shadows. For this passage there is a real disconnect between what I have been trained to hear when we read this text versus what Jesus actually says. It was a New Testament scholar named Obrey Hendricks who showed a brilliant light for me on this text and now I am stuck with a whole new point of view: **Strive first for God's kingdom and God's justice.**

Jesus says, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life . . . Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them."

I have always taken this passage to be an ancient version of the Bobby McFerrin song *Don't worry, Be Happy*:

*In every life there is some trouble, but when you worry, you make it double . . . Don't worry, be happy.*

My (our) training (or default system) tells us that this text means "to let go and let God" or "stay on the sunny side, always on the sunny side" or "all things work together for good."

I could go on with the sayings. Now the sayings have their place, but what became clear to me from re-reading this passage is that those sayings clouded my understanding of this text. I needed to look at this passage anew.

What Jesus **really** says is strikingly different. It is something that you or I are not at all prepared to hear. First of all, **Jesus did say** don't worry about what you will eat or drink is not life more than food. But what that means for the people that Jesus was preaching to is not at all what it means to you and I. When you tell someone, "Hey, don't worry about food," what does that phrase

mean? When I say it, I usually mean “I’ll order pizza or Chinese,” or let’s just pick something up at McDonald’s or Panera or Chipolte or wherever.

And when I do worry about food, the questions that I ask myself are: “What am I in the mood for?” or “What do I need to eat to lower my cholesterol?” or to prevent macular degeneration or heart disease? I think, “How am I going to keep the weight off?” and so forth. Sometimes I am not really eating food, I am eating nutrients whether it is fish oil pills or glucosamine or I am hydrating (i.e., drinking water). Or I eat to celebrate or relieve stress.

Jesus was talking with a whole different group of people about food in first century Palestine. The 5,000 people filling the hillside were subsistence farmers. For them, food was about survival. Virtually every moment of every day was about working the land.

Three of my uncles were dairy farmers in Connecticut. I used to love waking up first thing in the morning and running down to the farm to help with the chores. When I was little, I used to have to sit with my aunts and my grandmother and shell peas or husk corn. When I got bigger, I got to shovel the barn and bale hay. That work was an important part of my summer vacation, but I really have no idea what it would have been like to have really done that 24-7 for my whole life. I know that this is not what my uncles did for their vacations.

Not only that, but Uncle Ray, Uncle Billy and Uncle George were a far ways from subsistence farming. They had tractors, plows, discs, combines and trucks and milking equipment. They produced enough milk so that they could send their children to college and retire before they turned 65 and go on lots of trips to see dairy farms in other parts of the world. They produced enough so that their survival did not depend on the whims of the weather.

By contrast, the farmers of Jesus’ time lived from season to season. If there was a drought, they went into debt. If disease hit their livestock or their fields, they went into debt. If they were lucky,

they had an oxen or could share beasts of burden with a neighbor. There was no such thing as surplus. There was only survival.

And on top of what it takes to raise all of your own food by hand with maybe a few beasts of burden, the Roman government and the priestly class of Jerusalem conspired to take the very best from the farmers of the land. The Romans demanded 25% of the harvest and the priests got 10%. The result of this system was that most farmers had to go further and further into debt just to stay on the land, and most of them became tenant farmers or sharecroppers before long.

Have you read *The Grapes of Wrath*? Have you read the accounts of African-American sharecroppers from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, or better yet talked with those who remember those accounts. This is much closer to the situation of those tenant farmers to whom Jesus preached. This was not the first time or the last time that food was used as a weapon or a tool of oppression, but it was the story. **Strive first for God's kingdom and God's justice.**

So it is to these people that Jesus says, "Is not life more than food?" And I can hear the murmur, "What is this man talking about?" In the daily grind of life for those subsistence farmers, life really was about food. And they were trying to grow food in the midst of an unjust, exploitative, mean-spirited, brutal economic system. **Strive first for God's kingdom and God's justice.**

And Jesus says the same thing about clothing, "And why do any of you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field." Once again, there is a 2,000-year-old gulf between us and the first century hearers of these words. When you and I worry about clothing, we worry does this color go with my hair (or my eyes) or do these pants make my butt look big. Depending on the appointments or meetings we have on a particular day, then we might worry whether this suit or this dress will make the right impression – do I look serious?

To those subsistence farmers, clothing was about protection from the elements: from wind, rain and cold. It was about protection from the embarrassment of nakedness. I can almost hear the laughter in the crowd as Jesus makes fun of the rich people of his day (who dress for many of the same reasons that we do), when he says, “Even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.” **Strive first for God’s Kingdom and God’s Justice.**

In fact, there he goes again. Jesus is introducing a little class warfare into what we presume is a nice comforting saying. Well it wasn’t a nice comfortable saying and the class warfare was already there. The warfare was being waged by the Roman occupation and the priestly authorities who conspired with them. Jesus only names it. Jesus makes fun of Solomon and those who admire him. Then Jesus gets to the main point, the punch line (verse 33), “But strive first for the kingdom of God and God’s justice, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

There are some critical key words in this verse:

**Strive:** Synonyms for this word are struggle, endeavor, go all-out, do your best, do your utmost. This is a full commitment. This is *not* the same as “try.” I can hear Yoda saying, “Try not. Do or do not. There is no try.”

**God’s Kingdom:** Here we have another 2,000-year language problem. If you say the word “kingdom” to me, then I think “moats, castles, dragons” and Middle Ages stuff. We have to break this word down a little bit more. For Jesus, the kingdom of God was a realm, a territory, a nation governed by God. After all, Jesus literally taught his disciples to pray, “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

**God’s Justice:** Here we have another language issue. In the NRSV, this gets translated as “righteousness.” Why am I saying “is justice?” Here is what is going on.

The NRSV translators simply are carrying forward a tradition. In Koine Greek, the word at question is *dikasoune*. Beginning about

400 years ago, translators would render this word as either justice or righteousness and someone chose righteousness for this passage. That was okay for this passage because at the time, righteousness had a social connotation. In other words, God's righteousness included a relationship with the world was not only a personal relationship but a relationship with all of creation.

What we have been doing as a religious people has been putting God in a box for the last couple of decades. More and more if you say that someone is righteous, it means that they have a good personal moral code. I have never heard anyone refer to an economic system as righteous or a political system as righteous. So if we want to understand this text, we need to embrace God's justice.

For Jesus (and his hearers), it would have been impossible to separate righteousness from justice. And at the heart of God's justice is the sabbatical and jubilee commandments to forgive debts. The people gathered on the hillsides heard Jesus much more clearly than you or I can. Remember, these people knew something about debt. **Strive first for God's kingdom and God's justice.**

But strive first for the kingdom of God and God's justice (throw off this debt system, this exploitative, corrupt, mean economic system) and all these things will be given to you as well. You will have enough to eat and to feed your families and maybe even dress yourselves nicely once in a while. After all, God has created an abundant world. It is not that there wasn't enough. There was plenty. Shortages emerged as those in power sought to concentrate their wealth. **Strive first for God's kingdom and God's justice.**

It is clear where Jesus stands. He stands on the side of those who are poor and marginalized. And Jesus stood against the priestly class, the Roman imperial powers, the nobles and officials who worked to concentrate their wealth. The question isn't really WWJD – What Would Jesus Do? The question is WDJD – What Did Jesus Do?

Jesus stood on the side of the poor and marginalized and called for justice. Actually, the question isn't even WDJD. The hard question is whether you and I will stand with Jesus.

On Monday of this past week, there were two important meetings going on. The Columbus City Council approved spending \$15.6 million to tear down the City Center Mall and build a park. The mall has been vacant for six months.

Council members were careful to say that no city tax dollars are going to be used for that project. The money will come from the Capitol South Urban Redevelopment Corporation. Capitol South was created in 1974 and gets its money from two parking garages that the city paid them to build. Capital South will use that money to finance the project to demolish the mall. The demolition is so expensive because Capital South wants to preserve the underground parking garage so that they can't just blow it up. It has to be taken down piece by piece.

Also this week, city leaders were rolling out proposed cuts to pensions and city programs and a proposed .5% income tax increase. So it is interesting that even with the city's financial crisis, that the city leaders feel so strongly about the vacant mall that they have to tear it down now.

The other meeting was the BREAD rally on Monday evening at Congregation Tifereth Israel. A total of 465 delegates from 42 congregations gathered to hear God's call to pursue justice for the poor and marginalized. Research committees reported on campaigns to strengthen the Franklin County Drug Court, increase access to health care and address the "worst of the worst" 100 vacant and abandoned homes in Franklin County. The research done by BREAD's Action Committee makes it clear that we live in two cities. A city for the "haves," where there are resources to tear down a vacant mall, and a city for the "have nots" where there aren't enough resources.

On Monday, May 4, thousands of people from BREAD congregations will gather at Veterans Memorial to stand with the poor and marginalized in our community. We will be standing for:

\* A strong drug court: We have two different justice systems. If you have money, your attorney can request and get “treatment in lieu” for a non-violent felony offense. If you are poor, the system is much more likely to throw you in jail. In the state of Ohio, one in 25 adults is under the control of the criminal justice system. **Strive first for God’s kingdom and God’s justice.**

\* Investment in our community health centers: We have two different and unequal health care systems. If you have money, you can go to Dublin Methodist Hospital where every room is private and each has a flat screen high def television. If you don’t have money, you go to the emergency room. If you are poor and lucky, you can go to an overcrowded community health center, where staffs are providing excellent care in substandard conditions. The infant mortality rate in Franklin County for African-American babies is 15.7 deaths per 1,000, twice the overall rate and three times the national average. We will be calling for our member of Congress to lobby for three new community health centers out of the \$1.5 billion that is allocated in the federal stimulus for just this purpose. **Strive for God’s kingdom and God’s justice.**

\* Focus on vacant and abandoned buildings: We have two different standards in Franklin County for abandoned buildings. If you are downtown or in an affluent suburb, millions of dollars are available. If you are poor, there aren’t even enough resources to count the number of vacant homes. On Monday night, Richardine Stewart of Good Shepherd Baptist Church told us how she couldn’t refinance her house, not because of the condition of her house, but because there are too many vacant buildings in her neighborhood. **Strive for God’s kingdom and God’s justice.**

There is little question, in my mind, that Jesus will be standing or sitting in the auditorium with us on Monday, May 4, with those who are living on the edge. Now, there are some of us in worship here today do live on the edge. There are people in our

congregation who wonder where their next meal will come from. There are probably many more today than there were eight months ago. There are others of us who really have no idea what it means to live on the edge. When you are not one of the subsistence farmers, it is easy to be seduced. **Strive first for God's kingdom and God's justice.**

Here is my problem. (Maybe, it is your problem too.) I like nice things. I like to eat good food, wear nice clothes, drive a nice car, live in a beautiful house, drive on tree-lined streets. I like to visit good museums downtown. I am impressed by large buildings. I would like a nice park down the street from my office where the City Center Mall currently sits. If you don't live on the edge, it is easy to get seduced. But if you get seduced, you will not be standing with Jesus, you will not be right with God. **Strive first for God's kingdom and God's justice.**

I work with the BREAD Organization because I want to be right with God. And, I need a lot of help in order to keep my priorities straight. I need a lot of help to see things as they really are. I need a lot of help to resist the seductions of the dominant, consumer culture. Finally, I need a lot of help to effectively confront injustice; my voice alone is not sufficient.

The power of our numbers is needed if we are going to move Columbus to be more like the city of God, the kingdom of God, a place where God's justice reigns. God does not want two cities, separate and unequal. God wants one city where all people have access to drug treatment, to food, to safe neighborhoods, to health care. There are Justice Ministry Network members in this church who have asked you (or will ask you) to attend the Nehemiah Action Meeting on May 4. Will you say yes when they ask? Will you say yes when Jesus calls you to stand for justice? Will you say yes when First Congregational Church seeks to reclaim justice as its mission?

The good news is that there is an abundance in God's world. The bad news is that those resources are concentrated in the hands of a few. The good news is that we can be instruments for the fair

distribution of God's bounty. **Strive first for God's Kingdom and God's Justice.**

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Copyright 2009, First Congregational Church, UCC