

# Caretakers of the Gospel Message

Third of three sermons in the 2019 Stewardship “Caretakers” series  
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October 28, 2018—Stewardship Commitment Sunday

- 2 Corinthians 5:17-20 Good News Translation <sup>17</sup>So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! <sup>18</sup>All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; <sup>19</sup>that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. <sup>20</sup>So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.
- Matthew 6:25-33 Good News Translation <sup>31</sup>“So do not start worrying: ‘Where will my food come from? or my drink? or my clothes?’ <sup>32</sup>(These are the things the pagans are always concerned about.) Your Father in heaven knows that you need all these things. <sup>33</sup>Instead, be concerned above everything else with the Kingdom of God and with what he requires of you, and he will provide you with all these other things.”
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: We are “Caretakers” of the gospel message of God’s eternally-saving love made available to us in the son Jesus Christ.

As you know, when on the campaign trail political candidates have “stump speeches” that they deliver more-or-less unchanged as they travel from rally to rally. It’s likely that Jesus, too, had some common themes that he repeated frequently in his traveling ministry. In fact, it’s *because* Jesus said some things many, many times that followers were able to recall them and commit them to writing years, even decades later.

For the final installment in this sermon series looking at our role as “Caretakers” of God’s gifts, the scripture lesson comes from the section of Matthew’s gospel that’s known as “the Sermon on the Mount.” While Jesus preached, was there a stenographer in the crowd taking down his every word? No. The Sermon on the Mount represents a compilation of some of Jesus’ most memorable messages. The messages were memorable in part because Jesus preached them again and again. They were also memorable because sometimes Jesus said what people didn’t expect to hear: “*Blessed* are those who *mourn...*?” “*Blessed* are you when people *insult* and *persecute* and *tell all kinds of evil lies* against you...” “*Don’t* perform your religious duties in public...”<sup>1</sup> Those are probably not the kind of messages people expected to hear from Jesus.

Today’s gospel lesson from the Sermon on the Mount contains just such a surprising passage. Jesus told his audiences, “Don’t be anxious about the stuff that you need every single day of your life—stuff like food and clothing.”

That advice sounds reasonable in our day, what with our closets overflowing with wardrobe choices, we probably aren’t worried about whether we can be dressed for autumn temperatures. And while we might wonder what we’ll have to eat, we probably never wonder if we’ll eat tomorrow, what with our refrigerators and freezers well-stocked, not to mention restaurant options just minutes away from anyone. No, we don’t have much reason to be anxious about what we’ll eat or drink or wear.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Matthew 5:4, 5:11, 6:1 Good News Translation

But “back in the day,” Jesus was speaking to a population for which anxiety about daily needs was a constant. They lived hand-to-mouth. A bad harvest meant hunger pangs were ahead. Take good care of that tunic, friend, because when you need to replace it, someone has to shear the sheep and spin the thread and weave the cloth before they can begin to sew the fabric. Except for those very few in the powerful, wealthy elite class, people *always* had in the back of their minds some level of anxiety about the availability of food and drink, clothing and shelter.

So Matthew reports Jesus telling the crowd, “...do not be worried about the food and drink you need in order to stay alive, or about clothes for your body. After all, isn't life worth more than food? And isn't the body worth more than clothes?”<sup>2</sup>

This is one of my favorite passages in the Bible. I often find it a helpful passage to share in funerals because of those comforting words of Jesus assuring us that God knows what we need.

But as I looked at this passage this week I was drawn to a verse that, quite honestly, I've tended to gloss over. Jesus began to summarize his message in verse 31 where he said, “So do not start worrying: “Where will my food come from? or my drink? or my clothes?” And then after saying not to worry about food or drink or clothes Jesus (or maybe Matthew the gospel writer) added this parenthetical comment: “(These are the things the pagans are always concerned about.)”<sup>3</sup>

“Pagans” is a term for people who don't embrace a religious tradition. If pagans – people without a religious foundation for their lives – were always anxious about what they will eat or drink or wear, Jesus was holding up a contrasting attitude for his followers to embrace: that we can let go of our anxiety. How can Christ-followers possibly do that? Because we know what the pagans do not yet know: that our lives are securely in the hands of a merciful, compassionate and provident God. So Jesus encouraged a different focus for we who know the God of Love and Mercy: Jesus said, “Instead, be concerned above everything else with the Kingdom of God and with what [God] requires of you, and [God] will provide you with all these other things.”<sup>4</sup> As we learn to trust God more and more, the anxiety we might feel diminishes –

- We know that our efforts and God's grace will provide for our daily needs;
- We don't obsess about possible consequences of international squabbles;
- We don't freak out every time we hear predictions of “a major storm” heading our way;
- We realize that people who are different from us are not threats to our well-being and safety;
- We know that no matter how changes in our society impact the church, we need not be anxious because God will provide a way for Christ's church to be useful in the world.

Trusting God sounds easy, but it takes courage. It takes faith. It even takes effort – deliberate choices. Some people find that having the courage to trust God is hard, as is pointed out in a little story I came across this week.

It has to do with the process of joining a church. When people decide they want to become formally connected with this congregation through membership, I have them complete an information form that also asks them to note some of their interests, commitments and passions. That information-gathering process isn't unique to this church: Lutheran pastor Peter Marty wrote recently about a new member who filled out such a form at the church he serves. Marty also serves as editor of *Christian Century* magazine, so in the most recent issue he wrote that in that space on the information form asking about interests and hobbies and passions,

Everything from tagging monarch butterflies to helping kids with disabilities learn to swim has shown up in that space. Last spring, a class participant wrote only four words in the box: “Trying to be faithful.”

[Marty's column continued] I pondered those words late into the night. Was this woman embarrassed by a series of missteps in her life? Might there be an addiction? Since her husband wasn't with her, was her marriage in trouble? As I've gotten to know her in

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 6:25 Good News Translation

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 6:31-32a Good News Translation

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 6:33 Good News Translation

recent months, the meaning has become clear. Marla isn't interested in nominal Christianity with a thin religious veneer covering over [personal] motives and impulses that are anything but religious. She doesn't want to see how little she can do in life and still be considered a Christian. Marla knows the Christian life is hard work.<sup>5</sup>

We who seek to follow the way of Jesus as Caretakers of the gospel just have to keep working at it, day by day, week by week, year after year. We don't always get it right. Sometimes we miss opportunities to bring hope to someone's life. Sometimes we rush past a person who is hurting and needs a compassionate listener. Sometimes we allow selfishness to derail our good intentions. It was the poet Maya Angelou who once remarked,

"I'm working at trying to be a Christian and that's serious business....It's not something where you think, 'Oh, I've got it done. I did it all day—hot diggity.' The truth is, all day long you try to do it, try to be it. And then in the evening, if you're honest and have a little courage, you look at yourself and say, 'Hmmm. I only blew it 86 times. Not bad.' I'm trying to be a Christian. ...I'm always amazed... when [people] walk up to me and say, 'I'm a Christian.' I always think, 'Already? You've already got it? My goodness, you're fast.'"<sup>6</sup>

Yes, the Christian life is work. But as Caretakers of the good news, Jesus has given us a significant, joyful and, in the end, rewarding task: to be God's agents sharing seeds of faith with people in our world, our nation, our community, our home. We are Caretakers of the gospel message of God's eternally-saving love made available to us in the son Jesus Christ.

What are we caretakers of? A building? Yes, that's part of it. Are we caretakers of this voluntary association we call a community of believers? Sure, we enjoy this fellowship; we want to foster broader, deeper friendships throughout the congregation and spanning generations.

But I'll say it again: what's been entrusted to us—what we're called to be Caretakers for—is the gospel message of God's eternally-saving love made available to us in the son Jesus Christ.

- Our friendship with one another, while enjoyable and fulfilling, is not the purpose of this church—our purpose is live our lives guided by the love of God, and to introduce others to that love.
- Maintaining and enhancing the impressive beauty and the comfort of this building is not the purpose of this church; while it's important to be good stewards of this valuable asset, our purpose is to introduce others to the forgiving mercy of God.
- Even the deeds of kindness we do individually and the acts of service and gestures of generosity we perform as a congregation aren't the ultimate purpose of this church; they are signs that we're trying to carry out our purpose, which is to introduce others to God's claim on their lives, God's place in their lives, their place in God's purpose.

At the root of our identity as followers of Jesus is our responsibility as Caretakers of the good news of God's unconditional love. Everything that we do for our church, everything that we invest in our church's ministry and mission is not to provide for our comfort or to impress others. God brings us together as Rocky River Presbyterian Church for the sake of sharing Jesus with the world.

As someone has observed, Jesus isn't a CEO of a charitable institution; he's the leader of a faith movement. God entrusts us with the responsibility to be Caretakers of the good news. God entrusts us with this responsibility because as we well know, "...God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."<sup>7</sup>

That the world will know and receive the gift of eternal life—that is why God calls us to be here, to be together: to be Caretakers of the good news of God's love.

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Marty, "The Life of Faith Takes Practice," *Christian Century Online* emailed 10/23/2018, accessed 10/23/2018.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Marty, "The Life of Faith Takes Practice," *Christian Century Online* emailed 10/23/2018, accessed 10/23/2018.

<sup>7</sup> John 3:16-17 New Revised Standard Version