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Make it Simple #1
Peace, Seattle
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Matthew 6:25-33

FOLLOWING JESUS

In his book THE JESUS WAY,[1] Eugene Peterson gets right to the heart of the challenge we face as North Americans seeking to follow Jesus. He writes:

> Many who understand themselves to be followers of Jesus, without hesitation…embrace the ways and means of the culture as they go about their daily living "in Jesus' name," but the ways that dominate our culture have been developed either in ignorance or in defiance of the ways that Jesus uses to lead us…[the] Jesus [who meets us in Scripture] is an alternative to the dominant ways of the world, not a supplement to them." (p. 2)
>
> "The North American church at present is conspicuous for replacing the Jesus way with the American way…(p. 5) The great American innovation in congregations is to turn [them] into a consumer enterprise. We…have developed a culture of acquisition, an economy that is dependent on wanting more, requiring more." [with a whole] industry designed to stir up appetites we didn't even know we had. We are insatiable." (p. 6)

The logical extension of these cultural tendencies is the question that keeps so many of us awake so many nights: WILL I HAVE ENOUGH?

- Enough income to support my lifestyle?
- Enough home value to keep from going underwater?
- Enough savings to get us through the recession?
- Enough set aside for the kids' education, for the daughter's wedding, for the right level of retirement, for…you name it.

MAKE IT SIMPLE, this four-week focus on our lives as stewards, invites us to look at our lives not through the lens of the American consumer economy, but instead through the lens of God's economy. And today's gospel reading brings us to its pulsing center:

> DO NOT WORRY ABOUT YOUR LIFE, BUT LET YOUR STRIVING BE FIRST TOWARDS GOD'S REIGN, AND ALL THE REST WILL BE TAKEN CARE OF.

Growing up in my family, there were up to ten of us around the kitchen table for every meal. We always sat in the same places—places carefully engineered by my mother to keep conflict at bay. The un-annunciated question as the food made its way around that round table was: **Would there be enough?**

Now the short answer was: there was always enough. But to ward off the question, my father, when cued by the rising tempo of eight hungry mouths chomping at the bit, would inevitably pronounce the family dinnertime motto: **NOBODY GOES AWAY FROM THIS TABLE HUNGRY**.

But that motto, an axiom of our family life, was not the first thing that was said. The first thing said, as we bowed our heads, was a table prayer, and it often enough it was this one, from Psalm 145: (sing)

> *The eyes of all wait upon thee, and thou givest them their food in due season.*
> *Thou openist thine hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing. Alleluia! Alleluia!*

[1] Eugene H. Peterson, *The Jesus Way: A conversation on the ways that Jesus is the Way.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pages 2, 5, 6.

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It was that blessing, you see, and others like it, that spoke the truth about our life together in Jesus, that gave context and meaning to what our life as a family would be, that affirmed the true nature of things—God's provision for us.

It was that prayer that made my father's claim—nobody goes away from this table hungry—possible.

And when that word came into our ears and made its way to both brain and belly, something like a collective sigh would come over us, and the tumult would be dialed down a few notches, and somewhere inside, our hearts would respond, YES, THERE IS ENOUGH.

Following Jesus means trusting that in God's economy there is always enough. But living this way is easier said than done.

I don't know about you, but when I don't feel like I'm going to have enough, what happens to me is, first, I get grumpy; second, I start evaluating what I have by comparing myself to what other people have, third, tunnel vision sets in and I start seeing deficits instead of abundance everywhere I look… and fourth, I hold on even more tightly to that which is within my grasp. It's not a pretty picture.

In contrast to this kind of grasping that I, that we, do when we're not sure if there'll be enough, we have this image of Jesus' grasp of us from the 10th chapter of John:

> My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. (Jn 10:27-28)

The word image is of being completely enclosed within Christ's benevolent hand. Completely.[2]

Jesus knows our tendency to want to be the holders rather than the ones held, to be the ones in charge rather than to trust God's will; to be God, rather than God's servants.[3]

Jesus knows that living our lives this way leaves us anxious and powerless. So Jesus does a little pastoral care and values clarification with a whole crowd of people. We call it, the SERMON ON THE MOUNT.

Jesus covers all kinds of topics in that sermon—the kingdom, the role of God's law, prayer—huge spiritual issues! And then, he gets down to everyday, nitty-gritty stuff—like why we worry so much.

IT ALL BOILS DOWN TO THE QUESTION, he says, knowing where the seeds of our worry are planted OF WHO YOU'RE GOING TO SERVE—GOD OR WEALTH.

Of course those first listeners wanted to say "God." And so do we.
Of course they, in fact, served wealth. And so do we.

> 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?

[2] Mildred and Luverne Tengbom, *Fill My Cup, Lord: Meditations on Word Pictures in the New Testament*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979) p. 49.
[3] *Make it Simple* online sermon resource.

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These days we are looking at the birds of the air and considering the lilies much more closely than ever before. Our service to wealth and unrestrained progress has left our lives and the earth barren. We're dismayed to count fewer birds and lilies, challenged to learn and change.

The flora and fauna of God's good creation, in their fragile existence, speak to our responsibility as stewards. But first—and this is where Jesus begins—they attest to God's abundance.

God holds us completely in his grasp; God cares for us when we are here and continues to care for us when we are gone. And we are invited, commanded, and supported to do the same.

Let me MAKE IT SIMPLE for you, Jesus says: Care for all this and all these. Imagine lives beyond what you can grasp…beyond your own.

The beginning and ending of following Jesus, is having faith that, when we put our trust <u>not</u> in ourselves, or in our earning power, or in our accumulated assets, or in the myriad things we own that mark our lives as successful, <u>but</u> rather in the Jesus way, <u>there will be enough</u>.

> Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' Yes, the dominant culture strives 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."

Consider this a personal message from Jesus to you. But consider it more than that, too. Consider it a message to us together—this congregation—the body of Christ in this place and time.

As sisters and brothers claimed and called in the waters of baptism, Christ summons us to his Eucharistic table where we enter into that rhythm that orients us to God's economy and teaches us the steps of the Jesus way: **TAKING, BLESSING, BREAKING, AND GIVING.**

Meeting him at this Table, we find our lives held and reformed, a nd we, in turn, give ourselves, Christ in us, to be <u>taken, blessed, broken, and distributed</u> in lives of witness and service, justice & healing.[4] That's the simple way. That's the Jesus way.

Let us pray:
God, our Creator and provider. All that is needful in our lives is sent by your gracious ordaining. Grant us the faith to believe that, in the realm of your economy, there will always be enough. Keep our eyes trained on Jesus and step by step, lead us in the Jesus way, so that the world might be blessed through our sharing. In Jesus' name. Amen.

[4] Peterson, op. cit. p. 6