

We are in the middle of a series "In search of beauty" exploring how Jesus brings awe, wonder, true beauty into our lives that pulls our awareness off of ourselves and connects us to the bigger world around us. Implied in this series is the idea that we don't always experience every moment as beautiful and that, if left to our own devices we sometimes get a little self-focused, a little unaware of the bigger world around us and in the process see, and create, less beauty than we want.

This is why we have movies like the dead poets society **SLIDE** and songs like you only live once—we want to be the kind of people who stand on desks and seize the day but we worry that left to our own devices will sit on the couch and seize the remote.

At the same time, faith in the modern world is sometimes associated with exactly who we don't want to be – people who live boring, safe, rule-following lives and who only interact with people who think the same way as them and who contribute to ugliness—and who seem to be hyperfocused on identifying that which they find bad or ugly instead of focused on beauty.

But what if this guy Jesus wanted relationship with him to help mitigate the pressures that keep us paralyzed and keep us focused on our own small worlds?

In the modern western world I'd argue that our anxiety about not having enough is a big part of what keeps from engaging with the wider world and from seeing the beauty around us—we worry we don't have enough time, enough beauty, enough status, enough intelligence, enough cool, enough money, enough power, enough love.

Our entire consumer economy is predicated on convincing us of that; Maybelline's success depends on convincing women that they are definitely not born with it, Kay Jewelers success depends on convincing men that they won't have love (or at least won't make out) without giving the object of their affection shiny things, Apple's success depends on convincing all of us that we'll be left out of the cool crowd, **SLIDE** and resigned to life in bad khaki's, without their devices.

This anxiety is a big part of what keeps on a little hamster wheel, fruitlessly pursuing resources we think we need to be happy and using up our time and energy that could be spent impacting the broader world.

So we try to acquire cool, or distraction or beauty or status or even meaning. And when our acquisition efforts fail, we feel anxious. But even when we as we acquire these things we don't seem to experience a corresponding relief in anxiety because we start to worry about how to protect what we have acquired--as we gain more access to resources our default setting seems to fear the loss of those resources. **SLIDE**

The United States is now the most anxious nation in the world, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. And I'm quoting from an article in slate now,

This national surge in nerves is somewhat baffling because we're actually safer from true danger than we've ever been. However, According to the 2002 World Mental Health Survey, people in developing-world countries such as Nigeria are up to five times less likely to show clinically significant anxiety levels than Americans, despite having more basic life-necessities to worry about. What's more, when these less-anxious developing-world citizens emigrate to the United States, they tend to get just as anxious as Americans.

However, this is not actually surprising when you understand our human tendency towards "loss aversion" or the fact that once we acquire something we become irrationally concerned with its loss. This understanding of the human psyche was first named and researched by a psychologist named Daniel Kahnemen who ended up winning a Nobel prize in economics by showing how irrational we all are in this respect.

His research found that once we acquire something we value twice as much as before we had it and will expound far more energy to protect it then we would have to acquire it in the first place. So If I was to tell you I'd give you \$10 if you'd run 5 miles a lot of you would say no—that just sounds like too much unpleasantness for \$10. But if I give you 10 dollars and THEN tell you that you must run five miles in order to keep it, you are twice as likely to say yes

This is why when we acquire something—more income, more power, more status—instead of being more likely to share it (which is what we want to believe we'd do) – we become more concerned with losing it, more intent on protecting "our share".

If we think about it, the areas where it's easiest to be generous are not the areas where we've recently acquired more (though that would be rational), instead it's that sometimes narrow category of resources we know we have plenty of and are certain we can replenish. For example, I am confident I have an unlimited supply of advice and helpful tips about how to do so many things and I share them with my husband freely—I don't think of all my helpful suggestions as generosity—they are just the natural outflow of all my fantastic ideas about how to live.

So the question is, can relationship with Jesus free us from that burden? Can it help us experience lives of abundance instead of scarcity? Could faith help experience life as people who are certain we'll always have enough—enough time, love, status, power and money—so that we can live lives where instead of hoarding these resources for ourselves, we can give them away to others, freeing us up to recognize and share beauty on the reg?

We are going to see what the foundational text of our particular faith tradition, the bible has to say about this.

We'll start with a story that about God teaching an object lesson on this topic of where we get our resources and what we should do with them. Maybe you've seen Prince of

Egypt or the movie 10 commandments, if so then you know that a key part of the biblical narrative is when Charlton Heston **SLIDE** leads the Jews out of slavery in Egypt through the dessert to the promised land.

This time in the dessert is kind of like a 40 year long DTR talk between God and his people; he's letting them know what it means to be his people, and they are getting to know what it means for him to be their God; what he expects from them what they can expect from him. So at this particular juncture, there was not enough food and God's people were hungry. Moses/Charlton Heston is like God's liaison with the people and so through Moses, God promises them that he'll provide bread every single morning. And God tells them that each person should just gather as much as is needed for their household—this is not a one-time deal, its going to come every morning so just take what you need. **SLIDE**

17 The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. Everyone had gathered just as much as they needed.

19 Then Moses said to them, "No one is to keep any of it until morning."

20 However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell.

NOTE: This is not Just God being a diva and then messing with them when they don't listen to him; this is God saying, listen, trust is important part of our new relationship SO don't check my text messages every day, it makes me feel like you don't trust me.

SLIDE God makes such a big deal of this, going to the maggot option so quickly, because if the bread didn't get maggoty, then the people could have gathered huge bins of it and felt self-sufficient for days to come—that may have temporarily relieved their anxiety but it does nothing for their worry about their long term future.

If, however, they **MUST** get new bread every day (because of the maggots), they learn to trust that God really will provide food for them—and can be trusted on other matters as well.

SLIDE

Jesus picks up this theme when he arrives on the scene some many thousand years later. Jesus is teaching and someone asks him to help settle a dispute with a family member about an inheritance and Jesus responds by saying "listen it is not my job to be the judge here, but what I can tell you is that the greed you are displaying—that I can judge as dangerous. And then he goes on to tell a Parable— kind of like a fable--a story to illustrates a bigger principle about the danger of greed:

SLIDE

"The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.

A note here—Jesus says the LAND of a RICH man produced an abundant crop, he's reminding the audience that this wealth is a gift from the land (and based on his audience's understanding, a gift from God)

The man then does what the Israelites did with the manna—he takes a gift and says well now I've got to hoard this gift.

I don't know about you, but I can absolutely relate to this. When not googling “maggots” on google images, my day job is in fundraising for institutes of higher ed. A few years back, when I worked at the University of Chicago and I had responsibility for a certain group of alumni but someone, who was assigned to another fundraiser, this person reached out to me directly and asked to meet. We met for lunch and over lunch, without me doing a thing other than show up, she told me she wanted to make large gift to the university. Now as soon as this happened, I came back to the office and was talking to my boss and seemed to forgot that I had nothing to do with the visit or really the gift—as I was getting showered with praise I felt the strong need to HOARD the credit for this gift—even though it really wasn't my effort NOR was credit for these gifts even something I was being measured on since this person was outside my portfolio—it was just a nice burnishing of my reputation. And then as I soaked up this burnishing, I became quite intent on entering the gift in our system of record in such a way that my name would be permanently linked to this gift—so when the person who did manage this alum, reached out to me and asked if HE could be listed on the gift—everything in me wanted to say “no”—I now wanted to protect this new shiny asset, and asset I didn't need and didn't earn. I'll tell you how the story ends later but I can tell you I can relate to the rich man building barns for the grain he neither earned nor even needs.

So, Jesus continues with his story and I wish I could do a ron burgundy voice because I'm pretty sure that is what Jesus would have used for this next section: SLIDE

The man continues...And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'

And here we start to see more of the crux of WHY we do this behavior, we think storing our resources will allow us to have relief from our anxiety about having a good life—that it will allow us to relax, to enjoy life. But Jesus, rather graphically SLIDE, points out the futility of our attempts to relieve our anxiety—he's saying “good plan, but actually you have way bigger fish to fry—you can't prevent death by storing up these goods – but you did just waste a lot of time building new barns for food you can't eat.”

SLIDE Jesus then goes on:

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. ²³

...And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁴ If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest?

.... And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it.

For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you

need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

Jesus is saying shift your focus from ensuring that you'll have provision (what you will eat and drink) –because listen everyone else (in this context nations of the world is a way of saying the people without faith) everyone spends time worrying about that—and don't worry God knows you need that stuff, so he'll take care of it—that's whole benefit of having faith in me, I can assure you provision on all of this stuff so you stop hoarding and start sharing the resources you have and have the freedom and security to engage with this big, beautiful world I've created...and the confidence to give generously – of your time, your treasure, your talent—to help bring beauty and peace and healing—to the ugly and broken bits.

But you might be thinking like me—ok, that's nice but if we get down to brass tacks, it sounds like Jesus is just telling me “don't worry which is the least effectual thing you can tell someone who is worrying.

Well, he actually isn't – he is saying replace worry—which is passive and impotent—with something active, seeking –which in this sense means look for but also help build—his father's kingdom which in this context is almost like a world for culture—a set of governing principles which shape what is valued—jesus talks about his father's kingdom as this alternate system, this culture where outsiders are insiders, a system where radical generosity rules and a place where ultimate justice reigns.

But that still begs the question—well how exactly do we do this? Seek this kingdom, practice trusting God to provide? Do we quit our jobs and sit passively by? No, God asked the israelites to collect the Manna every morning, he wants us to participate—just listening to Him about where and how to get our needs met.

SLIDE In order to do that, we are going to look at some advice from Paul had been someone with a ton of power in corrupt system of his day—and after an encounter with Jesus gave up all that power and security to live out this life that was devoted to bringing about this alternate culture. This is what he says:

*The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving **let your requests be made known to God.** ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

⁸Finally, beloved,^[e] whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about^[f] these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

At first read, this might seem like another variation on “don’t worry” but with a closer read, I think it provides us with a roadmap for trying this.

- 1) Cultivate practices that allow you to experience the nearness of God. This might be in nature, through meditation, with certain friends, through different expressions of music or other art. In order to experience God as providing we have to create space where we experience him as near enough to do something. If you don’t have any practices where you feel God is near then talk to Leah or your small group, about some ideas she might have
- 2) Tell God what is making you anxious – ID what it really is and tell God.
- 3) Cultivate radical gratitude.

paul doesn’t advocate being in denial, he is just saying “look around—if there is ANY thing good, ANYthing that is praiseworthy—think on those things” –by redirecting our anxious brains to things which produce gratitude we can break the anxiety cycle that can be so paralyzing. And what we look for has a huge impact on what we see; when we are anxious we expect bad things and so we interpret events with that expectation; shifting what we look for can actually have a powerful impact on what we experience.

And as we begin to expect God to provide we start acting in ways that allow God to provide—we stop hoarding the manna and get the delight of the fresh stuff in the morning. I know that might sound like magical thinking, or like something oprah would hawk—all I can say is try it and see if its better than your current system!

Back to the story of the gift I was trying to take credit for...as I received that e-mail asking me if the other gift officer could get credit, I spent some time strategizing how I could appear like I was being generous but still get the credit for myself—and this just produced more anxiety as I tried to figure out how to do this deviously—and thankfully that feeling in the pit of my stomach that I know as anxiety—that caused me to stop and present my request to God—I said “God I want to get this credit because I want to

be respected at work. But I'm also thankful for all the ways you've already taken care of me in my career" –and as I prayed that prayer, I was reminded of all the ways God had already taken care of me and I felt like I actually WANTED the other person to get credit. So I wrote back that I'd love Josh to book the gift, that I didn't need to be listed on it in anyway. And this decision, this has had ripple effects for my interactions with that whole other team, opening up new opportunities for collaboration—and just generally helped me feel better about the work I do.

And that takes me back to the first sentences—the exhortation to let our gentleness be evident to all.

First for some help on the word translated as gentleness --here because that is a word that I basically only use when telling a baby not to poke a dogs eye out). But what the greek is getting at, is a character trait of one who "yields to, gives way on, or submits on." This is where we get the translations of "gentleness, moderation, or reasonableness."

This idea of yielding, giving way is the direct opposite of the need to protect our resources (our time, money or reputation) and in this Paul ...**he is not saying be gentle because Christians are supposed to be nice—he's saying that if you know God will provide, you are free to yield to the needs of others and experience the joy and peace that comes with not having to fight for our own needs, confident that they'll be met by our good God.**

I think that is what I experienced when I was able to trust God's provision for me at work and not believe I was responsible for my success at work. So for me at least, it's helpful to read these two sentences not as an order to do something that seems quite difficult (rejoice all the time and yield to other people) but rather as the result. I don't know about you but I need motivation to break out of my ingrained habits of worry and anxiety and hoarding my stuff. So for me its helpful to remember what Jesus is promising in exchange for our trust – he is saying give me your worry, trust that I will provide and in exchange I'll help you **SLIDE**

-Have more joy

-Be less of a jerk

-Experience more beauty.

Sounds like a decent deal to me...

