

How to Be Human: A Jubilee Spirituality for All of Us - Learning Abundance

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[0 : 0 0] Good afternoon. My name is Erin Byrne and I am the Director of Family Ministry here at the table. This summer we're talking about the Gospel of Luke and how Jesus shows us what liberation can look like in our world. Last week you may remember Daniel talked us through Jesus's first sermon where Jesus announces that he is here on earth to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Today we're going to read from a later sermon in Luke 12. This is a passage many of you are probably familiar with. If you have a Bible with you feel free to turn to Luke 12.

The text will also be up on the screen behind me. Gospel of Luke chapter 12 verse 22. Then Jesus said to his disciples, therefore I tell you do not worry about your life what you will eat or about your body what you will wear. For life is more than food and the body more than clothes.

Consider the ravens. They never sow nor eat. They have no store, sorry they do not sow or reap. They have no storeroom or barn yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable are you than birds?

Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest? Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin.

Yet I tell you not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will she clothe you, you of little faith? And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink. Do not worry about it. All of the nations of the world long for these things, and your father knows you need them. But seek God's kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

[1 : 5 3] Do not be afraid, little flock, for your father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide for yourselves purses that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. I have not always been a big fan of this passage. I don't love it when people in the Bible or people in general tell me what to do. And I especially don't love being told how to feel. It's also my experience that it's almost never helpful to go up to someone who is worrying and tell them to just stop worrying. Maybe you don't have anxiety. Have you thought about that? It feels extremely condescending.

I can only imagine that Jesus' first century followers felt similarly. Jesus' disciples were largely living in poverty, so I assumed that they were worrying about making ends meet, trying to make the choices that work best for their lives and their families.

My first impulse when I read this text is to imagine the disciples' wives rolling their eyes as the guy who recently fed the 5,000 tells them not to worry so much about groceries. Easy for you to say.

Those of us in this room may or may not be struggling with paying for groceries, but I know a lot of us, including myself, have heavy things on our minds. When we are dealing with poverty and disease and violence and grief, how dare Jesus tell us not to worry? This gets to attention we're wrestling with throughout this sermon series on Luke. We live in a world where we see that there is suffering around us, and we know that that kind of world also existed in Jesus' lifetime, where the Jewish people lived in deep poverty under a very violent Roman Empire. But we also see glimpses of another world, the Genesis 1 creation of a world that God calls good at every step, the Jubilee vision in the Torah where God calls the Israelites to cancel debts and redistribute wealth, Jesus' descriptions of a kingdom of heaven that is good news to the poor and hungry and sick and incarcerated, the visions of healing and restoration we see in Isaiah and Revelation. What does it look like to bridge that gap, and how do we live in the meantime?

[4 : 07] I'm actually going to walk through this passage backwards. I wrote a version of a sermon where I walked through it forwards, but Jesus gives us some really key information at the end. So we're going to go backwards, and then hopefully we'll keep that end in sight as we go through it. So in that vein, we're going to start with the kingdom of God, which also gets called the kingdom of heaven throughout the Bible in the New Testament. Early in the book of Luke, Jesus says that he was sent to earth for the purpose of proclaiming the kingdom of God, and his actions bear this out.

Jesus talks about the kingdom of God all the time. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus starts his ministry on earth by going around proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven has come near. Jesus tells us that blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. In a famous passage in Matthew 25, Jesus says that God will say to some of us, come and inherit the kingdom. For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me. This is the kingdom. In today's passage, Jesus tells his followers not to worry about food or clothes, but instead to seek God's kingdom and all these things will be given to you as well. When we seek the kingdom of God, we are working to create a world of God.

When we seek the kingdom of God, we are working to create a world where nobody is worrying about clothes or food or shelter. These things will be given to you because in the kingdom we're creating, we are providing for one another. I think that Jesus puts this idea of the kingdom most succinctly in the Lord's Prayer. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

So when Jesus tells us to seek the kingdom of God, that's my starting point. We get visions of this kingdom of God, this jubilee spirituality where earth and its people are thriving, but we also know what the world looks and feels like now. And Jesus is asking us to seek it and giving us some advice on how to get there.

So now we get to the middle of our passage, verses 25 through 28. One of the reasons I haven't always loved this passage is, is that this part doesn't always feel true. It feels like Jesus is saying that the choices I make in my life don't matter, that it's not worth my time to budget for the month or make decisions, including anxiety inducing decisions about my money and my job and my future.

[7 : 07] I like to be in control of my life and I tend to believe that the things I worry about, the choices I make can impact my health and safety and happiness. Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Well, Jesus, I'm so glad you asked.

Decisions about healthcare, decisions about the things I consume and decisions about where and how I spend my time all impact my life in real and important ways. Does Jesus not know that? Does he not care? Maybe Jesus just doesn't understand that food is life or death for those of us who are not God incarnate.

As is often the case, there's some context that changes how I read this passage. When we back up to the beginning of the chapter, the beginning of the sermon that Jesus is giving here, there are two verses that stick out and affect the way that I read it.

Now, the first is Luke 12, verse four. I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who killed the body and after that can do no more.

This feels like a dramatically different reading from how I usually read the do not worry section. And then a couple of verses later, Jesus says, are not five sparrows sold for two coins? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God, which sounds really nice.

[8 : 20] But the commentary in my Bible includes a devastating note here. God's remembering these sparrows does not keep them from being sold in the marketplace and eaten. Of course, our later passage reminds us that the grass that God clothed so beautifully is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire to be fuel for the oven.

These verses make me feel like Jesus is maybe not saying, don't worry about the small things because it will all be okay in the end. Instead, I hear Jesus being honest about the fact that things don't always turn out okay.

This message isn't as easy breezy. I probably won't find it on a cute magnet or cross stitch, but I appreciate that it feels true. It's not that Jesus doesn't know that food is a matter of life or death.

It's that he's telling us something here about life and death. I think he's also telling us something about our own power and control. I do not know a ton about the psychology of sparrows, such as the ones that Jesus mentions in verse six.

But it is my understanding that sparrows make it their goal not to be eaten. Some sparrows succeed. Some sparrows avoid being caught in this particular moment.

[9 : 35] And other sparrows find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time and sadly do not make it. It's not because sparrows don't want to escape. It's not because they didn't try hard enough or didn't plan ahead and worry enough.

And fortunately, we read here that it's also not because God doesn't care about them. It's just because when you're a sparrow, there are sometimes factors outside of your control, like whether or not you live near an impoverished human society that is so desperate for food that they have resorted to eating small birds.

We, of course, also face some factors outside of our control as much as I don't like to admit it. It's tempting to want to believe that if we make all the right choices, we will get all the right outcomes.

But we might not. We might send a beautiful resume to 100 different job applications and they all hire internal candidates or have a hiring freeze. We might go on a bunch of first dates with people who end up being a terrible fit.

We might spend six months going through the process of buying a house only to find out that there is something the inspector missed. If you're like me, you may have listened to those examples thinking about how you could avoid or control those situations as well.

[10 : 50] If so, maybe sit with that. Whatever worries we're facing right now, there are some factors outside of our control that will come into play. We don't get to insist that because we did the right thing and spent enough time thinking and planning and worrying that we will avoid paper cuts and mismanagement and layoffs.

We will almost certainly experience those things whether we try to avoid them or not. I think most of us who have encountered disease or violence or grief already know that at some level.

However hard we may try and work to build long, happy lives for ourselves, Jesus is correct in naming that there are also a lot of factors outside of our control.

I know the sermon feels kind of dark so far. I hope I'm naming something that most of us know, whether we always admit it to ourselves or not. When Jesus tells us not to worry, we can receive it as a burden lifted from our shoulders, as a reminder that we can't fully determine our future even by worrying.

So the best we can do is to swim through whatever life throws at us and pay attention to what comes next. Jesus' sermon here is not a sign that God doesn't care about our worries. It's a reminder that for God, the goal is not to live the longest, most optimized life possible.

[12 : 11] It's not that God doesn't know the stakes. It's that God is focused on something bigger, on creating the kingdom, and she calls us to do that with her. First section.

Before we talk about the first section, the do not worry section of today's passage, I just want to mention I am not a therapist. I'm not qualified to diagnose or treat anxiety disorder.

And if you have anxiety that impacts your ability to live your life, I encourage you to find a treatment that works for you. For the purposes of this sermon, when I talk about anxiety, I'm not talking about clinical anxiety, but about worry and anxiousness.

And I'll try to make that distinction. The worry and anxiousness that we all experience, because I believe that that is what Jesus is talking about. In this first section, Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about their lives.

The Bible scholar R. Alan Culpepper writes that the Greek verb we read here as to worry can mean to put forth an effort or to strive after. He writes, the scholar writes, the prohibition against anxiety may therefore be interpreted as an encouragement to start making decisions that are not controlled by anxiety.

[13 : 22] That feels more manageable for me. I can't promise that I will stop being anxious, but I can name my anxiousness, work my way through it and take a deep breath and try to figure out if I'm making this decision, whatever decision is in front of me, out of fear and worry or because it truly is the right move to make.

Obviously, this takes time and practice, but it's comforting to me to think of this passage in terms of do not be controlled by worry about your life. And then I can learn to sit with worry and anxiousness instead of letting that be the thing that drives me.

So verse 22. So verse 22. Jesus said to his disciples, therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food and the body more than clothes.

Consider the ravens. They do not sow or reap. They have no store room or barn. Yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable are you than birds? Than birds.

Jesus tells his disciples not to worry. And then his immediate next thing is to bring their attention to the things around them. Consider the ravens. Consider the lilies.

[14 : 38] I think it's helpful to read this section slowly, step by step. Do not worry about your life. When you are fixating on the things directly in front of you, the food you will eat and the clothes you will wear, maybe take a step back.

Life is more than food. The body is more than clothes. Look up and consider the ravens. They have no barn. They don't store their food, but God feeds them.

And how much more valuable are you than birds? It starts to feel to me like a meditation, not a command. Don't be worried, but a calm.

Hey, look at me. The world is bigger than the things you're worried about. God's kingdom is bigger than food and clothes. So take a deep breath.

The people I know who love this passage tend to read it like that and receive it as comforting. The last thing I want to say about the beginning of this passage is just a reminder that God is driving us in this passage towards the kingdom of God, which is much more collective than the individual worries I sometimes think about when I read Luke 12.

[15 : 49] I think a lot of our worries have systemic solutions. We could try to deal with them individually, for example, by each building the skills to worry less about how we're going to pay off our debts.

But I am also excited about creating a world where debts aren't on the table. I'm excited to build a kingdom of God by creating a world where people have less to worry about.

Living into Jubilee spirituality and creating an economy of abundance enable us to build a world where we are looking out for many of the needs Jesus mentions. Clothes, food and possessions.

This is true on a small level where it might look like supporting our neighbors when they are hungry and on a larger level where it might look like more systemic solutions for costs like health care and child care so that the folks who need those things have their needs met.

Because we know that in a Jubilee world, my abundance is yours and your thriving becomes mine as well. All right, we've gone through the three sections of today's passage.

[16 : 48] I do want to do one more step back. This is the story that comes right before the do not worry passage. Luke 12, verse 16. Jesus told them this parable.

The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, what shall I do? I have no place to store my crops. Would that we could all worry about such things.

Won't somebody help me? I can't sleep at night because I don't know what to do with all this money. Of course, the rich man comes up with the only solution he is able to imagine.

Verse 18. Then he said, I know what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones. And there I will store my surplus grain. And I'll say to myself, you have plenty of grain laid up for many years.

Take life easy. Eat, drink and be merry. But God said to him, you fool, this very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?

[17 : 46] This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves, but is not rich towards God. Then Jesus said to his disciples, therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear, etc.

Therefore, I tell you, the rich man believes that by storing up treasures for himself, he can create a good life because he imagines himself to have that kind of control.

But in fact, this very night, his life will be over and he will have storehouses of crops for whom and no treasure in heaven, no work whatsoever towards creating the kingdom of God around him.

Which, of course, ties us back to the end of our passage. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide for yourselves purses that will not wear out. A treasure in heaven that will never fail.

Where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. God's abundance and the abundance of the kingdom of God is not the accumulation of individual wealth.

[18 : 47] It is not the optimization of our individual lives. It is the abundance of a treasure that is shared. And over and over again, Jesus encourages us to focus less on our own lives, important as they are, and more on creating that shared community of Jubilee, where debts are forgiven and treasure is for everyone.

So how are worry and control connected to the kingdom of God? What I get from this passage, now that I have spent a lot more time with it, is connection from Jesus rather than condescension.

Do not worry because worry distracts us from creating this kingdom of God. It helps me to think that Jesus is preaching here to himself as well. Jesus probably did worry about food.

As Toneto reminded us a couple weeks ago, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus spent 40 days in the desert without eating, and we read that he was famished. Jesus was a human person facing very human problems, and he also was facing some more specific problems, namely a very powerful empire looking for any excuse to kill him.

He had a lot to worry about. But Jesus' mission here on earth was not to survive for as long as possible. His mission was to proclaim that the kingdom of God is near.

[20 : 04] So I think of him less as a grumpy preacher lecturing people about worry and more like a sports team captain calling for a huddle. Hey team, we gotta get our heads in the game. I know we're all tired and our legs are sore and you left your knee brace at home because you were running out the door because you had to leave breakfast because your alarm clock didn't go off.

I get it, we've all been there. But we can't change any of that now. So we need us all to focus on the game in front of us. The game of course being building the kingdom of God.

So as we lean into Jubilee spirituality this summer, as we try to spend less energy worrying and more energy building a kingdom where people have less to worry about, we can follow Jesus' lead both as our teacher and as our teammate.

Jesus' instructions at the end of today's passage are clear and practical. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. I think sometimes we try to overcomplicate it, but at its most basic level, Jesus' command here is that simple.

Give money to people who ask you for money. Maybe donate to your local mutual aid group. Maybe help out at the food pantry that we just referenced. And then more broadly, we can work towards Jubilee spirituality advocating for debt forgiveness, wealth redistribution, and other systems that create abundance for all of us.

[21 : 22] I don't get any guarantees that the things I do to keep myself safe and happy will work out. So the best I can do is to look the chaos straight in the eye and try to work with God in the midst of all that, to create a world that is good news for the poor, release for the captives, recovery of sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and liberation and life for all of us.

In the hopes that by working together, we can create a world where future generations will get to worry less about food and clothes and housing and safety, and spend more time living into the abundance we're given.

Let's pray. God, today we pray for peace. I pray that as we go into this week, you would calm our minds and help us to see our worries in perspective.

I pray that you would continue to help us focus on the things that matter and support one another as we work towards liberation for all of us. God, I thank you for the abundant world that you've created, and I pray that you would guide each of us in being good stewards of that abundance.

Lord, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.