

**THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT  
SLEEPING WITH BREAD**

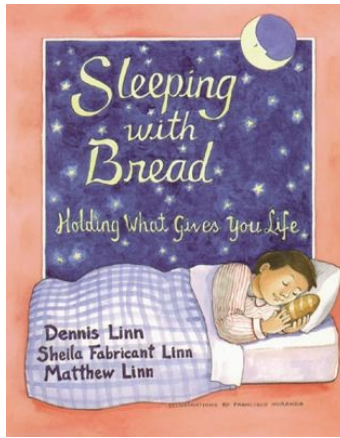
***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

In her book, *The Misunderstood Jesus*, Amy-Jill Levine, professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at the Vanderbilt Divinity School, writes, “The kingdom of heaven is not, for the Jewish Jesus of Nazareth, a piece of real estate for the single saved soul; it is a communal vision of what could be and what should be. It is a vision of a time when all debts are forgiven, when we stop judging others, when we not only wear our traditions on our sleeves, but also hold them in our hearts and minds and enact them with all our strength.”<sup>1</sup> I would paraphrase Dr. Levine’s words this way: “Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is not a list of instructions for the single saved soul; it is a vision of a time when we not only say what we believe, but we do what we believe with all our strength.”

In my study Bible, the section heading above today’s gospel lesson – Matthew 6:19-34 – is “Orientation to God.” That’s actually a good subtitle for Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount as a whole. When we pick out this or that rule or regulation or law, we run the risk of either judging other people because they don’t measure up or becoming self-righteous because we think we **do** measure up (probably both!). Dallas Willard, who was a well-known American philosopher known for his emphasis on Christian formation, echoed Dr. Levine’s description of the kingdom of heaven when he said, “The gospel is less about how to get into the Kingdom of Heaven after you die, and more about how to live in the Kingdom of Heaven before you die.”<sup>2</sup>

I have chosen to preach on big sections of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount for two reasons: (1) I wanted to cover the entire sermon between June 6 and July 25 and (2) I wanted to avoid focusing on isolated verses at the expense of what I think is the overarching message of Jesus’ sermon: “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” (Matthew 6:33) We’ve already covered a lot of ground in the last five weeks, and today’s gospel lesson teaches us even more about how to live a life oriented to God (and, consequently, toward our neighbors). Let me share some stories and illustrations to help us think about what Jesus might have meant when he preached, “Don’t worry!” Here is some food for thought . . .

#1 – Sleeping with Bread: About a month ago, a good friend gave me a book with the interesting title *Sleeping with Bread*. This is what the book looks like:



It looks like a children's book. It's actually a guide for families, friends and communities to use to examine their lives and to discern God's will. The book's subtitle tells you a little more about the book's message – *Holding What Gives You Life*. When John gave me the book over lunch, I flipped through it and was immediately captured by this story on page one: “During the bombing raids of World War II, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care. But many of these children who had lost so much could not sleep at night. They feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. Nothing seemed to reassure them. Finally, someone hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night the bread reminded them, ‘Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow.’”<sup>3</sup> I told John, “That story is going to show up in one of my Sermon on the Mount sermons.”

#2 – “Give us this day our daily bread.” Sleeping with bread reminds us of that petition from the Lord's Prayer, which we heard in last week's gospel lesson. It also calls to mind the opening verse of the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm – “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” That adjective – “daily” – can mean “each day” or “for today” or “for the coming day” or “necessary for existence.” And that idea is consistent with what Jesus teaches when he says “Don't be anxious about what you eat or what you drink or what you will wear.” Jesus is **not** telling us to sit back and expect everything to be handed to us on a silver platter. He **is** telling us to focus on God and God's righteousness in our lives – to make that the main motivation for living – rather than obsessing about what we have or don't have, because it cuts both ways . . .

#3 – “Look what I've got!” A troubling question to ask is, how are people who don't know where their next meal is coming from or don't have a home to live in or don't own adequate clothing supposed to hear these words of Jesus? Most of Jesus' original hearers probably lived day-to-day with many of those worries. But probably no one of us listening to Jesus' words this morning has those exact worries. In fact, compared to the vast majority of the world's people, we're more like the rich farmer in Jesus' parable who worried about what to do with his super abundance. The zinger in that short story is that in the space of three verses, the farmer refers to himself (I, me, my) twelve or thirteen times. It's all about him and what he has! And that preoccupation with what he has (rather than what he lacks) is what distracts him from

seeking God's kingdom and righteousness first. [By the way, that parable can be found in Luke 12:13-21, right before he preaches "Do not worry!" in what is called The Sermon on the Plain.]

#4 -- "What, me worry?" Jesus says, "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other." (Matthew 6:24) Can't we apply that same principle to Jesus' overall teaching in this section of his sermon? On the one hand, Jesus says, "Don't worry," and, on the other hand, he says, "Seek first the kingdom of God." It's hard to do both, which is why Jesus warns us against being distracted inordinately by life's worries.

Notice that Jesus is pragmatic. He knows life is full of challenges and worries. He even says, "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." (Matthew 6:34) In other words, we've got enough on our plates for today! Maybe that's why Jesus teaches us to pray, "Give us **this day** our daily bread . . . one day at a time!"

With apologies to Alfred E. Neuman, the face of *Mad* magazine, here are some thoughts about worrying that I gleaned from my quote journal. Some are spiritually based, others less so, but I encourage you to hear all of them in light of Jesus telling us "Don't worry . . . but seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness."

Jimmy Buffett – "Don't you worry 'cause it ain't gonna fix a thing."

Bill Browder – "Don't cross that bridge until you get to it, or else you'll have to pay the toll twice."

In the same vein, overheard at a meeting at the presbytery office in February 2010: "Don't trouble trouble until trouble troubles you."

Two from Henri Nouwen, well known for his writings about the Christian life: "A gnawing sense of being unfulfilled underlies our filled lives. While our lives are full, we are unfulfilled" and "Worrying causes us to be 'all over the place,' but seldom at home."

A couple from Mark Twain: "I have spent my life worrying about things that have never happened" and "Worrying is like paying a debt you don't owe" (sounds like Bill Browder!).

And a few from that prolific writer named "Anonymous" –

"People gather bundles of sticks to build bridges they never cross."

"For peace of mind, resign as the general manager of the universe."

"Worrying does not take away tomorrow's troubles, just today's peace."

"Anxiety is able to keep us awake all night, but faith is a marvelous pillow."

Finally, a couple that express in different words what Jesus teaches us about seeking out and living in God's kingdom: "Do not be afraid of tomorrow; for God is already there" and "We don't know what the future holds, but we know who holds the future."

#5 – "Seek Ye First" – Our closing hymn today was written by Karen Lafferty in 1971 and first published in 1973. At least, she wrote the music and the first verse in our hymnbook. Verses two and three are anonymous. Verse 2 – "Ask and it shall be given unto you, seek and ye shall find" – is based on Matthew 7:7 and verse 3 – "We shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" – is based

on Matthew 4:4 and is very appropriate to sing this morning! After she left her pursuit of a secular music career, she encountered some hardships. She told the story of “Seek Ye First” in an interview posted on the Reformed Worship website: “It was back in 1971. I had quit my entertainment job and was trying to support myself with teaching guitar lessons. I had three students! When my savings were all gone and I had no money to make my car payments, I became very discouraged and confused. One evening I went to a Bible study at church, and we talked about Matthew 6:33. I was tremendously encouraged and challenged by the words about Christ's kingdom. So, I went home, wrote the tune, recorded it on a tape recorder, and then sang this little descant part. I taught the song at church the next week, and it caught on right away. The Lord really paved the way for me with that song. ‘Seek Ye First’ has opened doors for me all over the world.”<sup>4</sup>

When Jesus tells us “Don’t worry,” he’s not foreshadowing Bobby McFerrin whistling and singing “Don’t worry, be happy!” or Timon, Pumbaa, and Simba singing “Hakuna Matata/No worries!” in *The Lion King*. Instead, Jesus echoes King David who wrote, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” and anticipates the apostle Paul who wrote to the Philippians, “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

We might say that’s what it means to “sleep with bread.”

***Let us pray: Gracious and generous God, in abundance you give us both spiritual and physical things. Help us to hold lightly the fading things of this earth and grasp tightly the lasting things of your kingdom, so that what we are and do and say may be our gifts to you, through Christ who calls us to seek first your kingdom and your righteousness. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008).

<sup>2</sup>Dallas Willard, source unknown, written in my personal quote journal.

<sup>3</sup>Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, and Matthew Linn, *Sleeping with Bread: Holding what Gives You Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup>Harry Boonstra, “Seek Ye First: Interview with Karen Lafferty,” at [www.reformedworship.org](http://www.reformedworship.org).