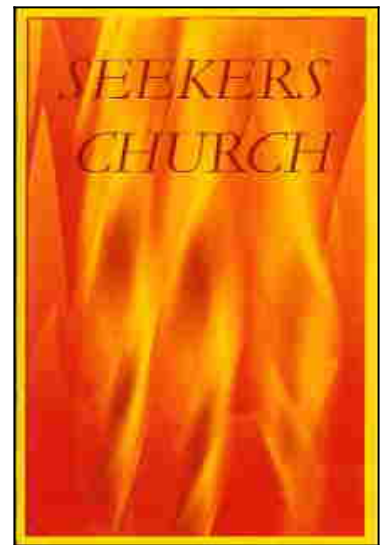


“Sermon on the Mount” by Muriel Lipp

May 25, 2008



Matthew 6: 24-34

It is the season of Pentecost, the presence of the Holy Spirit among us. Having gone through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are, in this Matthew text, back in his life again. There is much to learn in these ten verses of Matthew, part of the Sermon on the Mount. It seems strange to be preaching a sermon on a sermon. Didn't Jesus say it all? Nevertheless, these are the three things I've learned from this part of the Sermon on the Mount:

1. No person can serve two masters, God and money.

2. Pay attention to nature, to birds and flowers. They have much to teach us about God.

3. Don't be anxious about tomorrow. It will take care of itself.

That last one, worrying about tomorrow, I haven't learned that yet. And I suspect that many of you, my dear friends, have not learned it either. Some of the things I have learned come from the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who agrees with Jesus that the moment is all-important. Be present in the Now.

I know how beautiful the lilies are. In fact, I see God in flowers, and I talk to God in them all the time. Also birds. Jesus was a man of the open roads, and we are by and large city and suburban folks. If he were alive today, how would he help us see God in our lives—in fast-paced jobs, automobiles, computers, and the ever-present cell phone?

I don't worry about food and clothing because I don't need to. However, I confess I haven't done as much as I should to feed those who don't have food and clothing.

These Matthew verses we have today stress the importance of not being anxious. When Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, he knew he was facing failure and possibly death. And yet he said, over and over, five times in ten verses: Do not be anxious; tomorrow will take care of itself.

About food and clothing, most of us Seekers have more than we need, and we try to share what we have with others. Even so, things pile up. When our youngest daughter was home recently, she cleaned out one closet that was piled up with old clothes, a suitcase, and many books. She convinced us these things

should be given away. We agreed. Why did we hang on? If we were to receive a million dollars tomorrow, what would we do with it? In Seekers we are always having to deal with money. We have a group that handles Domestic Giving, and another, International Giving. Then there is the Time and Space group that handles uses of our building and how much to charge for rent. We think we are paying tribute to God, not mammon, with our money. But who knows? Compared with most people in the world, we are rich. We need to be humble and pray always that we use our money wisely. Money does not have to be mammon. It can also be love.

I often wonder, while driving to church, whether Jesus would feel at home with us Seekers. Are we like his disciples?

As a young person I discovered Dostoyevsky. My interest in him was not just that he was a writer, which I longed to be, but that he was also a person with epilepsy. I had that too, and it seemed to me if he could have seizures and still write, so could I. And when I read *The Brothers Karamazov*—the part where Jesus comes back to earth and meets the Grand Inquisitor, I was fascinated. Jesus goes into the church headquarters, his own church, the Russian Orthodox, and tells them who he is. They say we know who you are, but go away. We have things the way we want them. We don't need you any more.

And I wonder, if the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount came to Seekers one

day and said who he was, what would we do? Would he feel at home with us?

Would we feel at home with him? I hope so.

Let's look at that verse in Matthew 6: No person can serve two masters—God

and mammon. Mammon, a word we don't hear these days, refers

to wealth of all kinds: money, clothes, cars, things in general. If we are so involved with worldly matters, how can we know and spend time with God? In my dictionary, mammon is said to mean "things as an object of worship."

What, who, how is God? God, to me, is a fascinating mystery, and it is Jesus who has told us most of what we know, or think we know. Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit. It was a mysterious gift of love that could do all things. First we were to get this love and then spread it around. But it wasn't long before the church began waiting for Jesus to come back and do it for them. Look at our history: holy wars, crusades, pogroms, witch burnings, and the persecution of Jesus' own brothers and sisters, the Jews. Is the killing of fellow human beings serving God or mammon? The Christian church has, in its history, killed martyrs and mystics—and then later elevated them to sainthood. This strikes me as really strange.

Madame Guyon, a French nun who was the spiritual director of the Jesuit Fenelon, was imprisoned for her writings. During her imprisonment she occasionally wrote in her journals, using her own blood as ink. Those of you who are avid journalers: Would you write with blood if you had no ink?

But it wasn't just our Roman Catholic forbears that tortured and killed. After Martin Luther, the Lutherans persecuted their brothers and sisters, the Pietists, for practicing adult baptism. Many of these, the Mennonites and Amish, came to our country for freedom to worship. It was adult baptism that really bothered the early Lutherans.

In spite of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus left us to make up our own specifics. He gave us these general rules. Many of the mystics we have learned so much from said we had to deny the flesh in order to embody God in Christ. We Seekers,

however, and many other Christians, believe in body spirituality—that in dance, exercise, and movement in general, God is present to us. For me it is walking. I pray while I walk.

Jesus gave us many rules, but we need to remember that his most important rule was to love. When Ed and I were on an Elderhostel in Europe a few years ago, we saw some medieval art work entitled The Last Judgment on a cathedral door. Here were the Elect entering a heaven of eternal bliss with the sun shining and flowers blooming—and the damned, of course, naked, slinking off into a burning hell. As I looked at this work, I could not but wonder what Jesus would think of it. Was this love? And yet we can't help wondering what happens after death to the really evil ones. And are they evil because someone, a parent or caretaker, was evil? So is there forgiveness for them?

There are so many unanswered questions. And there are so many Apocalypses in the world today—China, Myanmar, Iraq, many parts of Africa, Afghanistan, and other places. It is hard to think of saying to these suffering people: Do not be anxious for tomorrow; it will take care of itself. Who wouldn't be anxious?

Yet I believe that no matter how horrible an Apocalypse, God will send angels to guard our very souls. As a survivor of the suicide of our beloved son, that was a cataclysm—truly the end of the world for me. At the time, I was taking a course in the School of Christian Living at our Massachusetts Avenue church on—can you believe it?—Ground Zero. It was taught by Bill Price of the World Peacemakers group. At that time, 1982, we thought that nuclear war with the Soviet Union (now Russia) was a possibility. Two days after our son's memorial service, I went to my next class. As we were discussing the possibility of being at Ground Zero when a nuclear bomb dropped, I told the class, with tears in my eyes: "I am at Ground Zero. For me the bomb has already dropped." What did

I feel? Devastation, yes. Pain, guilt, anger, yes. But something like grace, and certainly love, came through the pain. That year of grief was the most fertile time of my spiritual life, and everyone in our family attests to the fact that we are different now. Our love for one another is stronger and deeper than it has ever been. Though we were scarred, and we'll always be scarred, I think we have learned much about love. Jesus, in his teachings, gave us that theological twist, the paradox, where opposites are true. In sorrow there is joy; in losing, we find; in the end is the beginning.

And so we have Jesus, as he faces defeat and death, giving us in the Sermon on the Mount, rules for living positive lives. Enjoy nature and take it within. Worship God, not things. Don't be anxious. Be present in the Now.

In closing I want to repeat one of my favorite poems, written in the early 1800s by William Blake. I think it expresses some of what Jesus says here:

To see a world in a grain of sand,

And heaven in a wild flower,

To hold infinity in the palm of your hand,

And eternity in an hour.

Amen