



**Dr. James C. Howell**  
**Matthew 6:14-34**  
**February 27, 2011**

I have to confess that when I first looked into this week's reading, I found myself – I don't know how to put it – a little bit disappointed in Jesus. Jesus comes and says *Do not be anxious. Consider the lilies. Consider the birds of the air.* I needed something stronger, something bigger, something more substantial. Look at all that's going on in the world. The economy around here is still difficult, but on the streets of Tripoli there are people with machetes that are being fired on by government operatives. In New Zealand there was an earthquake. We don't have to just go around the world – right here there are so many people who we know here who are facing such a hard time, so much so, I notice now that when I begin to type into my computer and I'm on line, if I type the letter C it anticipates how I'm going to finish typing, and it enters the words CaringBridge – CaringBridge, because so often I'm checking on some one or another who is battling something. We need Jesus to give us something stronger. Instead, Jesus says *Do not be anxious. Consider the lilies. Consider the birds.* This is the reading of the day here. This is the reading of the day in New Zealand. This is the reading of the day in North Africa. It's everywhere. Then I remember that in Jesus' day, things were really just crazy. The Roman soldiers were in the streets with their swords and there was no one to fight against them. They slaughtered whomever they wanted. In Jesus' day, if you got sick, there was no doctor to go to. No CaringBridge to share the news with your friends. You pretty much just got sick and died.

I thought about this. The Gospel of Matthew, which reports this, was written not long after the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. Imagine how catastrophic this seemed to people. The entire sky over the Mediterranean grew very dark. People were frightened out of their wits by the very sky above them during these days. To people who were frightened nobodies, Jesus said *Do not be anxious. Consider the lilies of the field. Consider the birds of the air.* I want to muse with you for a little bit about birds and flowers. Flowers, as we know, they are beautiful and yet they are fragile. What more beautiful gift has ever been given to anyone than when a child goes outside and picks a handful of wild flowers and takes them in to mom or to dad, "Look, here."

I was at a funeral a while back. A friend's wife had died. He said he wanted to speak at her service. This seems like not a good idea to me, but he did. He sat up in the pulpit and he carried a single rose, and he said "She was like this, so beautiful, but so delicate, so lovely and tender and yet, so impermanent – a flower. Birds – birds are interesting. The Romans ruled the world, but they never got hold of the birds, did they? You just can't rule the birds. They fly off whenever you try to catch them. So, maybe those birds were a symbol of freedom against Roman tyranny. I thought about birds. It's easier to talk about birds as being wonderful but when they are actually around you it can be a mess. They can be annoying. Sparrows can be very annoying and I should share with you – I wrote in my notes – "and I can, too." What I didn't write in my notes, but I should have "and you can, too." Birds have a freedom. This is the amazing thing about birds. They can be in one place and then they're in another place. We think about the great migrations of birds from one continent to another and that is amazing, but for me

the real miracle of bird transport is the bird Jonner. You may not know the bird Jonner, but when my daughter, Sarah, was a little girl there was a robin who lived in our back yard, and she named the bird Jonner. And Jonner was amazing wherever we went. One time we were in Pennsylvania and Sarah said "Dad, look out the window – there's Jonner." Oh – came with us on the trip – the bird just appeared wherever we went. That's silly and a child's imagination, but I wonder, is God like that in some way? He had the eyes to see, to look at others, Jonner and us. God is here. The thing about birds, I bet for many people your first brush with death comes in the form of a bird. I know it did for me. I was a little boy – I don't know how old I was – and a bird I guess probably flew into the plate glass window in the back of our house and the bird was dead. And you know how it goes, the child scoops up the bird, comes to mom and dad, "Do something – do something. Take the bird to the doctor. Say a prayer or something so the bird can live and fly again." But there's nothing to be done and the bird is put in a box and buried in the back yard. It's an interesting thing about deaths, whether it's a bird or a person because after somebody dies nobody ever says, "We wish he hadn't shown up." Instead, what happens when somebody dies, whatever was annoying about them five minutes before they died, people just forget that, and we just remember the love and the beauty of the one who's gone.

Thinking about Jesus and sparrows, I remember one of my favorite novels by Mary Doria Russell. It's entitled "The Sparrow." I pulled it off my shelf and thumbed through it this week to see if there was anything there fruitful for the sermon. Toward the end of the book there is a remarkable passage when someone comes to a priest and asks why bad things happen, why is there suffering in the world. Here's the priest's answer: "There's an old Jewish story that says that in the beginning God was everywhere and every thing. God was a totality, but to make creation God had to remove himself from some part of the universe so something besides himself could exist. So God breathed in, and in the places where God withdrew, there creation exists."

Now the person asking is not happy with this and says "So God just leaves? God just abandons creation?" And the priest says "No, God watches. He rejoices. He weeps. He observes the moral drama of human life and gives meaning to it by caring passionately about us and by remembering us." Then the priest quoted Jesus' words in Matthew: *Not one sparrow can fall to the ground without your father knowing about it.* Notice Jesus doesn't say "God keeps sparrows from falling to the ground. No, sparrows fall to the ground, but God sees and God knows." There are earthquakes. There are revolts. There is illness. And God sees, God knows and God loves.

Thinking of sparrows, the 84<sup>th</sup> Psalm, we love it when the choir sings "How lovely are thy dwelling places, O Lord of hosts." It's fantastic. Another line from Psalm 84 is this: *Even the sparrow finds a home at your altars, O Lord.* I thought about this. There had to be some priest who was in charge of keeping the Temple clean because the Temple had to be spic and span because it was the holy house of God dedicated to the worship of God in whom there could be no pollution. Birds must have been a huge problem because they would get into the Temple and they would build nests up high in the eaves. They didn't have cherry pickers or anything to get them down. Birds can be messy and this must have gotten on the nerves of this priest. Sometimes, you know, during the service, the birds would flutter around and distract everybody from what the priest was trying to say – it must have been annoying to the priest to have sparrows – but one day the priest looked up and he saw the sparrow's nest and he saw the beauty

of it. He said "Even the sparrow finds a home in your house, O Lord. Even the unwelcome, even the unlovely, even the unwanted, there's a home in the house of God.

I think about St. Francis of Assisi, who makes it into all the bird baths. Francis gets kind of sissified I think. This is a tough guy. He went to Egypt. He went to Libya. He had immense courage. He was a trained soldier. But he considered the lilies. He considered the birds. One day he was out walking and a flock of birds came and they were chirping very loudly and his friars came and wanted to swoosh the birds away but Francis said "No, no, no. I wish to speak to the birds." And here's what he said to them: "My sisters, always be grateful to God for giving you the air in which to fly and trees for your homes and worms and streams for your sustenance, feathers to keep you warm. Beware of the sin of ingratitude and always give thanks to God. I have two thoughts on all this which I'll say quickly and then I'll be done. The first is this: When Jesus says *Do not be anxious. Consider the lilies and consider the birds*, he has said this right on the heels of saying *Do not lay up treasure on earth but instead lay up treasure in heaven*. We have heard Jesus say that and we say "Umnn, I'll take both." Jesus says *Do not lay up treasure on earth but lay up treasure in heaven*. We want both. We want treasure in heaven, of course, but we need some treasure down here too because the world is so crazy. What will happen if we don't have treasure down here? But Jesus says "You can't serve two masters." It is the divided self that is anxious. You have to choose.

I know you're thinking, I don't know what I'm talking about, but I can prove this to you. It goes like this – part of what I do for a living I very often see people a few minutes or a few hours after they have been to the doctor and the doctor has used the word "malignant." When you go to the doctor and the doctor says "malignant" everybody, unanimously, has the following experience which is something that mattered to you a lot five minutes before suddenly has no importance whatsoever. And you know what that means for us? It means sadly that we actually spend our lives on what doesn't matter. How sad. We're always building up treasure on earth but then something happens and we realize that none of that mattered at all. My whole life has been about something that was just silly and irrelevant.

I'll show you my personal onus of the moment, what the Howells are going through. On Tuesday of this week, Lisa and I will have been married 25 years. Twenty-five years ago this Tuesday, we came to this altar, right here, and got married. You should send Lisa a thank-you note for putting up with me all this time. And so, we're trying to figure out how to celebrate – it's our 25<sup>th</sup>, not 21<sup>st</sup> or 29<sup>th</sup> – it's our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. So, I go – where are we going to eat? This is a big decision, so I'm asking people – where would you go? And I'm on the web sites looking at menus and wine lists, just trying to figure it all out. And then – I'm about to get it settled – and then I get this e-mail that says my son has a basketball playoff game Tuesday night – oh, gosh – so now do we eat the night before? Do we eat after the game; do we eat before the game? And one of the web sites for one of these restaurants told me what to wear. It said "Smart, casual." I'm not sure what that is. And I know you're laughing because you know...

Jesus says *Do not be anxious about what you will eat or what you will drink or what you will wear*. Isn't that interesting? Jesus must look down at us all the time and just double over with laughter. Or perhaps he pities us. But the truth seems to be captured in what Jody Seymour said at that great men's gathering that we had a couple of Sunday nights ago. He told about the

pilot that came on the loud speaker and said "I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is we're making great time. The bad news is we're lost." And I suspect that's what we're doing, most of us here, we're making really good time but we're just lost. And if the doctor said "malignant" you'd think – oh, that doesn't matter. Lay up treasure in heaven. The second thing, it's important, it wasn't just anybody who said *Do not be anxious. Consider the lilies, consider the birds*. It was Jesus. It wasn't James Howell. It wasn't somebody you work with. It wasn't some pundit. It was Jesus.

God came down to earth, our savior. He said *Do not be anxious. Consider the birds. Consider the flowers*. Sometimes I think old-timey Christians like my grandparents knew Jesus better than we do. I think it's because maybe they didn't have as much or maybe they were outside more than we are. They would sing all these old hymns. I remember my grandparents singing "He's the lily of the valley" or "His eye is on the sparrow." That's kind of nothing, a sparrow. A sparrow falls to the ground. A sparrow might be annoying, but God's eye is on the sparrow. He sees, he knows, he loves. You see, that's what Jesus says to us with his heart full of love and his vision so hopeful for us. Jesus says *Do not lay up treasure on earth. Lay up treasure in heaven. Do not be anxious about what you will wear or what you will eat or what you will drink. Look at the birds of the air. Look at the lilies of the field. Do not be anxious*. I think that is the word we need for a week like this.

Thanks be to God for it.