

## STRIVING

By

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Text: Matthew 6:24-34	Date: 5/25/08	#0825
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Over the last two weeks on TV, in magazines and newspapers we've seen the desperate situation of victims of earthquake and flood. China and Burma are far away in one sense, but the tragedies there quickly evoke the plight of our own from tornados and hurricanes and wild fires closer by. It's not uncommon, then, to see the faces of those who have nothing left: their homes, clothing, possessions and means of livelihood, to say nothing of their loved ones, all gone, gone in an instant.

We've also viewed, by way of the news, the relief efforts. In the cases of Burma and China, next door neighbors in Asia, the relief efforts couldn't be more different. Burma seems less equipped and less willing to accept world generosity waiting at its doorstep. Whereas, China has allowed unprecedented media coverage of a highly organized endeavor to reach and assist the victims. Consequently, some are receiving and some are not what human beings require when everything has been taken away: basic shelter such as tents, clean water, medical attention, sanitation to prevent disease and of course food.

This morning we have read the well known verses from the Sermon on the Mount about the birds of the air and the flowers

of the field and how God provides for them apparently with no effort on the part of the birds and flowers. This is to argue against misplaced worry. As Jesus put it: “do not worry saying: what shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we wear? Your heavenly father knows that you need all these things.”

It’s in times like these that our fundamental convictions about possessions and basic human needs are put to the test. While you and I may not have suffered the total loss of all that we have, still we’re complaining about the cost of gasoline creeping up to \$4 a gallon, food costs soaring, the housing market softening, jobs in jeopardy, and the dollar weakening against currencies of countries where we’d like to vacation.

The words of Jesus never seemed more appropriate or necessary. If all our possessions were stripped away tomorrow, would we be able to thrive, not just survive? Would we be able to re-build a life around Jesus’ words: Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness? Maybe the relevant question is: considering all that we have right now: houses, cars, clothes, electronic gadgets, do we believe that all these things have been given to us, because, as scripture says, we strived first for the kingdom of God?

Let’s think about this question from a slightly different angle. I want to mention a very specific possession, one we probably don’t think about as a possession. Yet I own one; you may also. I have a deed for it: a cemetery plot. In this plot are buried my father, my mother and my aunt. For the record my father was a WW II veteran.

When I was young I clearly remember that the holiday that used to be on May 30 and now is celebrated on the last Monday in May, namely tomorrow, was called Decoration Day.

Decoration Day got its name in the decade following the Civil War when family members began decorating the graves of soldiers killed in action with flowers. General John Logan commander of the Veteran's organization, the Grand Army of the Republic, officially proclaimed that we should decorate the graves of the fallen. His proclamation was observed for the first time on May 30, 1868. As early as 1882, however, the name Memorial Day came into usage, but it didn't become common usage until a law was passed in 1967. And as we all know, the National Holiday Act of 1971 changed the date of Memorial Day so that we could have a three day week end.

Tomorrow there will be ceremonies, some of them at cemeteries, remembering those, as President Lincoln expressed it, who gave "the last full measure of devotion" to the cause, as Lincoln went on to say, "that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." There will be decorating of graves. But we will also be faced with Memorial Day sales, the unofficial start of summer with the opening of swimming pools and amusement parks and backyard picnics and of course the 92<sup>nd</sup> running of the Indianapolis 500 car race.

So, once again it is about the order of our possessions; the priority of what we hold as most important. You and I don't worry about losing our possession of a cemetery plot, but it's what that

cemetery plot represents that we are in danger of losing. If we give no heed to the realities of political and spiritual bonds, but crowd them out with a priority of entertainment and convenience, fill our life with material possessions and ignore a vast segment of the world's population that barely survives on less than \$1 a day, then we're in deep trouble; we've seriously lost perspective.

When Jesus says, "strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness," he's talking about how we intentionally are to orient our life, giving God serious time in praise and worship, serious time serving those in need as a way of honoring God. Jesus' point is that by making this relationship to God primary in our life, then we will have a true understanding and an appropriate stewardship of possessions.

The TV show I'm really addicted to is Antiques Roadshow, which as you may know is all about possessions. If you've never watched it before, it's usually on Monday and Thursday nights on PBS. Watch it with our scripture lesson as your lens: Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness and (using now my paraphrase) all the things we think are so important will have their true value revealed.

I like Antiques Roadshow because of the stories people tell about their possessions. They tell how they got them and why, how they have used them and how they have been taken care of over the years, what family members have told them about them and what they intend to do with them in the future. Of course, the professional appraisers finally give the owners a dollar figure

of the object's worth. Sometimes the owners are utterly surprised by this amount; sometime they are disappointed.

But it's not the dollar value that interests me as much as how the peoples' stories reveal the true worth of the objects. I listen for the stories that reveal the connections with ancestors and with values of which the objects are symbols. The flowers of the field and the birds of the air are the symbols that our own life has importance to God beyond our selfishness; and we would do well to be in touch with whatever (cemetery plots included) keeps that reality vital in all the decisions we make.