

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
August 7th, 2022
Luke 12: 22-34

“Do not worry about your life.” “Do not worry about what you will eat, and what you will wear.” Seems pretty straightforward. Don’t worry! Any questions? I’m thinking we might get out of here early on this summer day. Enough said, right? Do. Not. Worry.

Have you ever given that advice to someone who was worrying, who was anxious, in a whirl, maybe having a panic attack? How did it go? Did it remedy everything? I suppose that for some, a little reminder not to worry may help with a quick reset. I suspect that in most cases it did not help all that much. I offered Holly that advice once. I think her reply was, “Thanks, as if I hadn’t thought of that.”

For the hard-core worrier among us, we can say “do not worry about your life” all day long, but it will not likely abate that flood of thoughts, the bodily tension or tightness, that wave of bad case-scenarios, that tide of guilt as to whether we have been responsible, that memory of when things didn’t go well. Turning off the worry and concerns and all that triggers that worry and concern for us; it is not as easy as it sounds. And wisdom has told us, furthermore, that “this getting by stuff;” it does take some attention, some work, a lot of work in fact, and regular diligence, a little luck doesn’t hurt. And many have struggled. Many in this world do not have enough food or clothes, which may fuel some of us to be even more attentive to all the details of life, the food, the clothes, the bills, the savings account, retirement accounts, etc.

So, while we may concede to Jesus that we cannot add time to our lives through worrying, and we may in fact take a few hours off by worrying, we do not necessarily know how to balance the worry and diligence life requires with the trust Jesus invites.

Well, what if sidelining our worry and anxiety is more complicated than simply being told not to worry? Yes, we often have trouble believing trite sayings, like do not worry. But Jesus does more than simply say do not worry. He invites us to a different perspective. That is what he is doing. He is not building an intellectual argument. He invites us to consider the ravens, but ravens do not live forever. Not a great argument. He invites us to consider the lilies, but many a lily has been trampled under. These examples do not present some clear case that all will be ok. What I mean, is we could argue with it, we could point out clear cases where

things did not go well for the raven or the lily. But, Jesus is not arguing away our worry. Rather, he is inviting us to a different perspective.

So, the real question is not whether you worry or not, but what practice do you engage in that helps bring peace and perspective to your life and to your walk with the Lord? What practice do you engage in that after having engaged in that practice, you feel more peaceful, more trusting, less reactive, more clear? For many, it is prayer and time in scripture in the morning. A habit of pausing at the start of the day to read and reflect and to start the day in conversation with the Lord. Other practices may include walking. Sometimes a practice of taking deep breaths help. Others may find balance in exercise or yoga, a practice that makes one change pace and focus, engage the body in a way that reduces stress. For others of us, it is periodic retreats into nature, to break from the pace and stimuli and to be immersed in the natural world. What would you add to this sample list?

Our poem this morning reflects a retreat into nature as a way of responding to stress and worry. He does not present an intellectual case for why one doesn't need to worry, but he invites us into a different space where the weight of worry shifts.

When despair grows in me, ... he writes,
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting for their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

It reflects a practice that puts the writer in a different space, invites a different environment, different perspective, which then invites a different emotional response – not to stress and to grieve everything that may go wrong, but rather to rest in the grace of the world, and be free.

“Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!
²⁵ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁶ If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest?
²⁷ Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even

Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.²⁸ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith!”

Perhaps, like Berry’s poem, Jesus invites us into a different space, a space where a different perspective can invite a different emotional response. And in doing so, he asks some penetrating questions. Are you not more important than the birds? Are you not more important than the grasses of the field? And perhaps the question enfolded into those questions is really, do you really think you are the only one who cares? The only one who is attentive, who is capable, who is paying attention, who is present, who is willing and desirous to help? Does the world really rest on your shoulders? Perhaps it gets at those worries that the worst can happen, or happen again. Or it gets at how we have managed our vulnerability and the terror of it over the years.

We are invited to see the world around us differently. We are invited to stop staring at our bank account, or to stop dwelling on the uncertain, and to watch the birds. Direct your attention to the birds and behold them. Take in the flowers. Observe their rhythms. I think that is the key, to break from your own rhythms to behold the rhythms of the birds and the flowers. That is part of what I love about fly fishing. To do it well, you have to change your pace, slow your movement, focus your mind elsewhere, enter the environment and to take on its rhythms, and observe its world of details.

So, what practice do you engage in that invites you into a different space or a different rhythm that might invite a different emotional response? To do such a thing has a great positive effect on our psyche, on our mood, on how pleasant others find us to be around. Part of the pay-off of following this path of perspective is our own peace and well-being. It is that aspect that Berry’s poem brings out best, the ability to rest and be at peace. But Jesus takes it further than that.

The context and the emphasis of these remarks by Jesus about anxiety, you see, are not merely about anxiety in its own right. The context and emphasis is about discipleship, and a whole-hearted commitment to, and orientation toward the kingdom of God. So, the reasoning here for the curtailing of anxiety is more than just trying to sleep at night; it is more than just trying to keep from stress eating away at us, or getting ulcers. The basis for these comments about anxiety is that such a stress and focus around our day to day lives, about our personal or family needs - can make us unavailable. Unavailable to Christ, to one another, to the opportunities around us, the joys, the needs we can help meet, the good we might

contribute to, the ways we might learn and grow. We become consumed with our own world.

“For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them.” Your Father knows that you need them. You are not the only one who cares, or the only one who has noticed. But, “Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.” Instead of being consumed with these things. Strive for the kingdom. Be available to the work Christ has for you. I mean, we might start by considering the hours we have spent watching “news” and fuming at the TV. It may be that our daily practices keep us engaged and consumed with the worries and anxieties, and not free to the work of the Kingdom, nor the perspective and emotional response that Christ’s kingdom might invite.

The average person in antiquity owned few possessions beyond the basic amenities of life. They had few belongings. They lived in small houses, and had little means to protect what they had from theft or deterioration. They were dependent on the weather for their agriculture. They worried about that which can threaten the crop. Their day to day involved the gathering of the daily sustenance.

Our society and our lives are so different from theirs. Our closets are full of options, our pantries stocked. You will likely drive by several grocery stores on your way home and perhaps a department store teeming with things to buy, and a plastic card to buy it with. Our economy is altogether more complicated. Yet we are not all that different.

We too are continually in touch with the question of making ends meet, and we wonder what the next ripple of recession will be and how it will hit us. We worry about our children, whether we have done or are doing a good job to set them up for success. We get anxious when our employer starts to restructure, and we worry about finding meaningful work. We wonder if retirement savings will hold out. We worry about our health, and the health of loved ones. We worry what will come of our divided society. What have I missed? What would you add to the list?

How do we manage these worries? Do we say I will give more time and resources to the church and to God’s work when I get a handle on these things? I will give my time to others when things settle down. I will have more time and resources for hopes and dreams when I can just..._____. The charge Jesus offers here, however, is that the order of that way of thinking is off. Rather than waiting for the stress and worry to dissipate, we are called to seek the kingdom first. Perhaps

finding practices that engage us with the kingdom of God and its work can bring the peace and perspective and provision we hope for.

But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

³¹ Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.

³⁴ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The instruction to not worry has a simplistic sound to it, but in reality, it is quite complicated, in the sense that so much is entwined with our tendencies to worry or obsess over things. What we need is not a simplistic statement that doesn’t help to change the mix, and just makes us feel more guilty for still worrying. We need practices and spaces that invite us into a different perspective and rhythm, where a different emotional response might occur, where trust and faith might be restored. We need these practices often. We need these things not just for our own health and peace and sanity, but we need this so that we may be more freed up to give ourselves to Christ’s kingdom, to the work God has for us to do. We need the faith and perspective to help us seek Christ’s kingdom first, not at some distant mythical point when things all settle down.

And all God’s people said... Amen.

Luke 12: 22-34 - Do Not Worry

(Mt 6:19–21, 25–34)

²² He 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. ²³ For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. ²⁴ Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! ²⁵ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁶ If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? ²⁷ Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ²⁸ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! ²⁹ And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. ³⁰ For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. ³¹ Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

³² “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³ Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.