

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Thanksgiving Sunday  
Sunday, October 10, 2021**

**“Do Not Worry”  
Matthew 6:25-33**

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What does worry have to do with thanksgiving? The Scripture Lessons that we hear each Sunday are appointed by the Revised Common Lectionary, which is a three-year cycle of Scripture texts—and, in the other two years, the Gospel Lessons on Thanksgiving Sunday seem, well, more obviously connected to Thanksgiving. One year, it's the story from the Gospel of Luke of the ten lepers healed, where only one returns with thanks and praise to Christ who healed him (Luke 17:11-19). The other year we hear the passage from the Gospel of John where Jesus announce himself as “the bread of life” (6:35), “the bread of God [...] which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (6:33)—fitting as we give thanks this day for “daily bread.”

Our Gospel Lesson this morning, from the Sermon on the Mount, is—however—rather different. It's a passage largely about worry, and about *not* worrying. The phrase “do not worry,” which I've adopted as the sermon title, appears not once but twice in this Gospel Lesson. So as we explore this passage about worry, let's keep this question in mind: how does our Gospel Lesson about worry connect to thanksgiving?

“Therefore I tell you,” our Lesson begins, “do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” (v. 25). “[D]o not worry”: these words of Jesus come to us as a command...but that's a hard command to hear, isn't it? Those words, “don't worry,” they're hard to hear—at least partly because the more we're told not to worry, the more we tend to worry. As someone has said, “Telling people not to be anxious is like telling them not to think of an elephant” (Carey): saying not to do it makes us do it, just as saying ‘don't worry’ can remind us of all the worries we'd managed temporarily to forget. And what's more, being told “don't worry” can introduce a new worry, namely, that we're worrying too much! So now we worry about our excessive worry.

But I think there's more to it than that: “do not worry” is hard for us to hear also because we operate and function according to worry. In many ways, our worries set us in motion, determine our priorities, and shape our days: our biggest worries are what get our attention. The late Peter Gomes, who served as a resident preacher at Harvard University, once delivered a sermon on this passage—and afterward a parent confronted him, dismissing this call to leave behind worry and anxiety: “It was anxiety that got my daughter into this school,” the parent said, “it was anxiety that kept her here, it was anxiety that got her into Yale, it will be anxiety that will keep her there, and it will be anxiety that will get her a good job.” That parent concluded: “You are selling nonsense.” I appreciate that parent's honesty, bluntly acknowledging how our many anxieties and worries—financial, professional, personal—how these serve often

as our motivators. We can be so fueled and directed by our worries that I wonder if we'd know what to do without ourselves without them...

But we should also ask ourselves: how's that working out? We chase our worries; we try to rid ourselves of that stubborn sense of insecurity, but—in the end—it just never works. I'm reminded of something the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "Earthly goods deceive the human heart into believing that they give it security and freedom from worry. But in truth, they are what cause anxiety. The heart which clings to goods receives with them the choking burden of worry. Worry collects treasures, and treasures produce more worries. We desire to secure our lives with earthly goods; we want our worrying to make us worry-free, but the truth is the opposite. The chains which bind us to earthly goods, the clutches which hold the goods tight, are themselves worries" (DBWE 4:165).

In our society, we try to drown our worries by acquiring more and more—more money, more accomplishment, more prestige, more security... "Just a little more will be enough," we think—but 'enough' turns out to be exceedingly elusive. Maybe that's why it turns out, perhaps surprisingly, that even the very wealthy still worry about having enough money. There was an article in *The New York Time* entitled "I'm Rich, and That Makes Me Anxious," which quoted a financial advisor whose clients are multimillionaires, who said: "They never do feel they have enough." Try as we might, acquiring more simply doesn't eliminate worry: as Bonhoeffer wrote, "Abuse of earthly goods consists of using them as a security for the next day. Worry is always directed toward tomorrow. [...] It is our securing things for tomorrow which makes us so insecure today" (DBWE 4:165)

Yet, instead of the cycle of worry and more worry, Jesus offers us an alternative vision: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, 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. 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? Therefore do not worry" (vv. 25-31).

Jesus invites us to consider these two examples, flowers and birds, and in so doing draws our attention to something we'd maybe never realized before: they don't worry. Flowers and birds don't worry, yet they're nonetheless nourished. We may think that our worrying is necessary, that worrying is somehow productive, that we need our worries to get by...but birds and flowers do just fine worry-free. Worrying, it turns out, is not productive: it's needless, because worrying misses what the birds and flowers reveal to us: it is God—not our worries—who feeds and nourishes us.

Martin Luther, the Protestant Reformer, explained it this way: "no animal works for its living, but each has its own task to perform [...]. The little birds fly about [...], make nests, and hatch their young. [...] Oxen plough [...], sheep furnish wool [...]: that is their task, but they do not gain their living from it. It is the earth which produces grass and nourishes them through God's

blessing. Similarly,” Luther adds, we human beings “must necessarily work and busy [ourselves] at something. At the same time, however, [we] must know that it’s something other than [our] labour which furnishes [our] sustenance; it is the divine blessing. Because God gives [us] nothing unless [we] work,” he writes, “it may seem as if it’s [our] labour [that] sustains [us]; just as the little birds [...] would certainly die of hunger if they did not fly about to seek their food. The fact that they find food, however, is not due to their own labour, but to God’s goodness.” Luther asks, “For who placed their food there where they can find it? [...] For where God has not laid up a supply no one will find anything, even though they [...] work themselves to death searching.”

In our lives, we have many important and necessary tasks; but the task of providing for us remains God’s. As Dr. Cyr sang before: “We plough the fields and scatter the good seed on the land, but it is fed and watered by God’s almighty hand” (Claudius). Or, as St. Paul wrote, “only God [...] gives the growth” (1 Corinthians 3:8). Worrying is ultimately unproductive because—though we must fulfill our tasks—it is finally God’s responsibility to provide for us.

And so, in place of worry, Jesus invites us instead to trust in God’s care: “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (vv. 31-33). In place of worry, Jesus—refreshingly and astoundingly—calls us to trust in God, to seek the justice and reign of God, and to count on God’s provision to sustain us.

And that’s why the Lectionary was wise to appoint this Lesson for Thanksgiving, as we give thanks to God for the harvest. Spiritually and physically, not a day has gone by in our lives when God has not faithfully sustained us: our faithful God, and not our persistent worrying, is what has nourished us all our lives long. God, and not our worrying, has provided for us. And so, on this Thanksgiving Sunday, this command from Jesus—“do not worry”—this comes to us as a life-giving invitation to move away from worry—and to move instead toward trust and gratitude, trust and thanksgiving. May God enable us to worry less, to give thanks more, and to trust in the faithful provision of the God who cares for us. Amen.