

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Thanksgiving Sunday
Sunday, October 13, 2024**

**“Do Not Worry about Your Life”
Matthew 6:25-33**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

I wonder, when you just listened to our Gospel Lesson, did it occur to you: ‘what does this have to do with Thanksgiving?’ Notably, words like ‘thank’ or ‘gratitude’ don’t appear in the Lesson; instead, it’s a passage about worry—or rather, about *not* worrying. To confirm, Alison did indeed read the correct text! In fact, our reading from Matthew is appointed by the Lectionary for Thanksgiving Sunday; but, at first glance, it seems maybe like an odd choice. So a question: what does worry have to do with thanksgiving?

“Therefore I tell you,” Jesus says, “*do not worry about your life*” (v. 25). I’ve got to say, that’s really not very easy for us to hear. For one thing, when we get told not to worry, that sometimes makes us worry more; being told not to worry is like being told, ‘don’t picture an elephant’ (Carey). You just did! When somebody tells us not to worry, it *reminds us* of our worries. Or have you ever been told, “Don’t worry; it’s bad for your health”? Then I start worrying about how my worries are affecting my health!

But there’s something else. It’s hard to be told not to worry because a lot of us function according to worries; our worries are what determine our priorities. After all, worry is one heck of a motivator; the dentist starts talking about drilling out cavities, and all of sudden we diligently floss!

Once the resident preacher at Harvard University delivered a sermon on our passage from Matthew, and afterward a parent angrily confronted him about the importance of worries and anxieties: “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” (Gomes). You’ve got to appreciate that parent’s honesty; the truth is, many of us run on worries!

But we should also ask ourselves: how’s that working out? We chase after our worries; we try to rid ourselves of that stubborn sense of insecurity; but we never really succeed. In our society, people attempt to overcome worries by acquiring more and more—more money, more accomplishments, more prestige, more power—thinking ‘just a little more will be enough’...but ‘enough’ turns out to be elusive, and always escapes us. Some years ago, there was an article in *The New York Times* entitled “I’m Rich, and That Makes Me Anxious.” The article quoted a financial advisor, whose clients are multimillionaires; he said, “They never do feel they have enough.”

We can acquire as much as we want, but then we simply find new things to worry about. I’m reminded of something written by the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed by the Nazi regime: “Earthly goods deceive the human heart into believing that they give it security

and freedom from worry. But in truth,” he said, “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.” “Worry is always directed toward tomorrow,” he added. And “[i]t is our securing things for tomorrow which makes us so insecure today” (4:165).

We operate according to our worries; we chase after our worries in a futile effort to become worry-free; but none of that works. Yet more than that, our fixation on our worries can cause us to lose sight of something important. Worries are mostly imaginary; I mean, if you made a list of everything you’d ever worried was going to happen, you’d find that the vast majority of those worries never materialized. (And the things that *actually* went wrong, you didn’t see coming!) Worries—those ‘maybes’ and ‘could bes’ and ‘mights’—are very often the fabrications of our anxious imaginations.

And yet, worries—these *potentially* negative outcomes—they cause us to lose sight of the goodness in our lives *that is real*. There’s a children’s story that we listen to in our family that features a wise cat who tells a child not to focus about “what if” but instead to focus “what is”; see, worrying makes us so fixated on “what if” that we sometimes can’t even see “what is.” The possibility of our worry eclipses the reality of grace.

Let’s say you’re worried about an upcoming meeting. You get up in the morning and eat a nice breakfast—but you barely taste it, because you’re worried about that meeting. You see your family or your neighbour—but you hardly notice them, because you’re worried about that meeting. You step out into a gloriously sunny day—but it might as well be overcast, because you’re worried about that meeting. A colleague or friend sends you a kind note—but you scroll past it, because you’re worried about that meeting. Are you thankful for the breakfast, your family or neighbour, the sunshine, the note? No, of course not; you barely registered any of that; you can see only the worry.

Now maybe, as often, that worry turns out to be unfounded; the meeting went better than expected, and the worries you concocted never existed outside your worried imagination. But those worries did have an effect; those worries were a fiction that caused you to lose sight of reality. Blessing after blessing had been placed in your life that morning, but you couldn’t see any of it—because of the blinders of worry. And this is how worry can cause thanklessness—how worry inhibits our ability to offer thanksgiving to God for the grace that is *real* in our lives.

And yet, instead of that cycle of worry and thanklessness and more worry and more thanklessness—instead of all that, our Gospel Lesson offers us an alternative, as Jesus invites us to compare ourselves...to flowers and birds. Jesus said, “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).

It's an unexpected comparison, isn't it? I mean, we often compare our lives to other people's lives (which usually makes us worry that we're not doing well enough). But here Jesus invites us to compare ourselves to birds and flowers—and, in this way, he shows us something that we probably never realized: they don't worry; flowers and birds don't worry. And yet, as Jesus says, they flourish by God's blessing. See, we think we *need* our worries in order to function; but here Jesus shows us, through the examples of flowers and birds, that our worrying only *appears* productive. We don't really need our worries to operate; we only we think we do.

Just as worrying can cause thanklessness (as we fail to see 'what is' because of the blinders of 'what if')—thanksgiving can also diminish the power that worry has over us. As I explored with the children, being thankful doesn't suddenly neutralize our worries. But thanksgiving—giving thanks to God for what is, for what's real, for the blessing God has indeed given us—thanksgiving can make us realize that our worries are far smaller than the breadth of God's grace in our lives. Worry can reduce our thanksgiving, but—it turns out—thanksgiving can also reduce our worry; because when we give thanks to God, we recognize that our worry is not all there is.

So *that's* what our Gospel Lesson has to do with thanksgiving. Worry can cause us to lose sight of God's blessings in our lives, until it seems like our worries are all that's left. Then Jesus invites us to look at the birds and the flowers, who do not worry—and yet who, like us, flourish by the blessing of God. Today, may we defy our worries by giving thanks to God for the grace and goodness in our lives. Amen.