

In Pursuit of Peace

Luke 12:22-34

Rev. Dr. Lorie Sprinkle ~ October 21, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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.”

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My daughter, Toree, had always been home by her midnight curfew. She and her best friend, Vonna, had gone to see a friend who lived out in the country along the Little Spokane River just north of Spokane, WA. This was in the days just before cellphones became ubiquitous, and she didn’t have one. It was 12:30 and she wasn’t home. So I called Janine, Vonna’s mother, to see if the girls were there. They were not.

Janine was concerned as well, but we decided to give it a bit more time before we took any action. As the minutes dragged on, I became more and more anxious. My heartbeat was rapid, there was a knot growing in my stomach....

I knew what had happened – because I am a mother, and can to leap to the worst conclusion in a single bound. It was winter, the roads were often icy, especially in the country. So I was sure that the car had hit some black ice and skidded off the road, it had rolled over several times and landed in the river. A heavy sense of dread began to descend on me. I was just about to call Janine again when the phone rang. It was Toree.

“Where are you and are you OK?” “I’m fine. I’m at a gas station but I’m not sure where we are. We just passed a sign for Newport.” “Newport! That’s in Idaho! You’re going the wrong way. Turn around and head back to Spokane.”

It turned out that they had gone north on Highway 395 from town and had turned right to get to their friend’s house. But when they started for home, they got turned around and instead of coming out onto 395, they ended up on Highway 2, which runs roughly parallel to 395, and, not realizing it was a different highway, they turned left, which took them away from town instead of toward it.

We have all felt that intense worry that makes our hearts pound and ties knots in our stomachs. But what we experience on a more regular basis is probably the low-level chronic kind of anxiety and stress. It might have to do with health issues or work or family or finances. Or it might be more of a generalized anxiety that is just always there.

There is certainly reason enough to be anxious - there’s a whole lot going on in our world today that is very worrisome. And even if we’re not consciously aware of our anxiety, our bodies let us know through tight muscles in our jaws, necks and shoulders or irritability in our stomachs. And it seems like the anxiety level in our society just keeps on rising.

Jesus has been talking to the crowd, but now he turns back to his disciples and he tells them, “Do not worry...” I don’t know about you, but when I’m worried about something, the last thing that I want someone to say to me is “Don’t worry about it.” As if anxiety is a choice that I make and that all I have to do is hit some switch in my amygdala and it will magically go away. That’s not how it works. Fortunately, Jesus goes on to give his followers more than platitudes. “Life

is bigger,” he tells them, than the specific worry of the moment.

One of the things that anxiety does is to narrow our vision so that all we can see is the problem at hand. “Look up and look around,” Jesus says. “Yes, there are problems, but there is also a big world out there that God created and in which God continues to be active.”

“Look at the ravens – unclean creatures from the Hebrew perspective and nasty scavengers, and yet God cares for them. So how much more will he care for you?” Jesus poses a theological question. What is the true nature of God? If God is distant and disconnected from his creation, we should rightly worry, because that means that the cosmos is out of control. But, if God is actively engaged in his creation, that means that God sees us, knows our needs and will provide and protect, just as God does for the ravens.

Jesus also poses an anthropological question – who are we? If the lilies of the field do nothing but receive the rain, the sunshine, the nutrients of the soil and yet become more glorious than the great King Solomon, and if God cares much more for us than for the flowers... what does that say about our intrinsic value? Must we be human doings, striving ever harder to prove our value, grabbing after more wealth, more stuff, more importance, or does God intend for us to simply respond to the good things he gives to us?

This passage is a continuation of the one that Jeff preached on a couple of weeks ago about the man with an abundant harvest who took all the credit for his wealth. It was the *land* that produced the crops, and yet, the rich man claimed it as MY land, MY crops, MY barns, my, my, my... he was a fool because he failed to recognize that everything he had came from God.

So the first step in managing our anxiety is to look at the big picture, to recognize that God is present and active in the world around us, and to loosen the grip with which we so often cling to the people, the situations and the things in our lives.

Dr. Brene Brown is a sociologist who has done extensive work on the characteristics of those whom she labels as “wholehearted” people. That terminology is intentional. For though she writes to a secular audience, she is an Episcopalian. And the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, as is also true in our Book of Common Worship, has prayers of confession, like the one we just prayed, that recognize that we have not loved God with our whole hearts. And so to be wholehearted from a Christian perspective, is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Dr. Brown notes that one of the fundamental characteristics of wholehearted people is gratitude. Gratitude is also the best antidote to anxiety and fear. But gratitude doesn’t just happen. We have to be intentional about it.

A number of folks from Faith are running in the Folsom Blues Breakout Half Marathon this morning to raise money for clean water. I can pretty much assure you that none of those folks spent the past several months on the couch, watching movies and eating bon bons, then woke up this morning thinking, “I’m feeling quite rested now – I think I’ll go run 13.1 miles.” Not if they’re wise... Instead, they’ve been in training for months, starting with short runs and building up until they were ready for today’s run.

It’s no different with the spiritual practices. We start small, maybe having a reminder to begin each day with gratitude. Then building on to that, writing lists of what we’re grateful for, keeping a gratitude journal, taking time during the day to thank God for all that is good. Because prayer is not only a way to give all thanks and glory to God, it also reminds us that God is God and we are not. So gratitude is key to lowering our anxiety.

Another characteristic of wholehearted people, according to Dr. Brown is that they ask for what they need. And I wonder if a lot of our anxiety is caused by our overzealous self-reliance, which prevents us from asking for help when we need it. And I wonder if some of our anxiety might be relived if we could simply ask for what we need.

Because when we are feeling anxious, we are also often feeling helpless, alone and powerless, and what we need more than anything is to know that someone cares. We need a hug, a listening ear, someone to simply be with us. Instead, our tendency is to keep working harder and faster, frantically hoping that somehow we’ll gain control over whatever it is that we’re worried about.

“Do not keep striving after what you are to eat and what you are to drink,” Jesus tells his disciples. The Greek word for “striving,” is *zeteo* and means to fixate on. In this context it has the sense of the harried pursuit after something. A good way to get off of that hamster wheel is to stop and breathe.

I was at the Whitworth Institute of Ministry a couple of summers ago. Leonard Sweet was the evening preacher and one night was looking at Paul’s words from Philippians. “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding,

will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:6–7).

He finished by giving us a breath prayer based on this passage. A breath prayer is an ancient practice whereby you repeat a word or phrase on the inhale and another on the exhale. I’d like to teach you that breath prayer right now... “Anxious... nothing. Prayerful... everything. Thankful... anything. Peace...” (repeat)

And isn’t that what we long for? Peace? That quiet stillness, that calm deep inside that can soothe the fears, the longings, the worries, the agitation that dampens our enthusiasm for life and squeezes the joy right out of us?

Friends, we live in a pervasively anxious society. And that anxiety hinders our zest for life. According to Dr. Brown, we are the most in debt, obese, addicted and medicated cohort in history.* We lack peace. But that’s not how God wants us to live. For it is our Father’s good pleasure to give us his kingdom. And the characteristics of God’s kingdom are qualities like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control – the gifts of the Spirit. So how do we get from where we’re at to where God wants us to be? How do we begin to live as kingdom people?

Presbyterian pastor Earl Palmer has a delightful illustration to help us imagine how we might live as inhabitants of God’s kingdom. He talks about going to a reception where tables of food are spread out. It’s not too exciting – trays of cheese squares and crackers, a vegetable platter with Ranch dressing. But then he sees it – a bowl of those jumbo shrimp with seafood sauce. That’s what he wants. But the line is long and the people ahead of him are slow. And one guy is loading up his plate with the shrimp. Earl starts to get anxious and annoyed. He wants to call out, “Hey, leave some shrimp for the rest of us!”

But, what would happen, he wonders, if, when we entered the room, the host informed us that there was a grand feast in the adjacent room that was far superior to the one in front of us. Not only did it have massive bowls of jumbo shrimp, but there was also a huge slab of barbecued salmon with a delightful dill sauce and an oyster bar, for those who liked such things. It had platters of the finest imported cheeses and pates with gourmet breads, plus, there was an entire dessert table created by a renowned pastry chef.

How might that impact our attitude and behavior at the reception, knowing that a far better feast was ours to be had in just a little while? We wouldn’t want to fill ourselves up with the cheap food. We’d want to wait for the best. So we’d be gracious and generous with what

was there. “Here, can I help you with the cheese and crackers? Have you tried the shrimp, they look delicious!” Our whole demeanor would change. That’s what it’s like to live in God’s Kingdom – to be in this world but not ultimately of it.

And that’s not just about the great by-and-by. It’s the life that we can live here and now when we know God as our loving and gracious Father, not just as an intellectual construct, but as a lived experience. That’s what happens when we know, all the way down to our toes, that we are God’s beloved children and that God will provide and protect and be with us, whatever the difficulties that life may throw our way.

Because bad things happen. Jobs are lost. Families fall apart. Loved ones die. But as the Westminster Catechism reminds us, “in life and in death, we belong to God.”

“Seek first after God’s kingdom,” Jesus says, “and everything else will come your way as well.” So maybe Bob Marley was right after all. We don’t need to worry ‘bout a thing. Not because three little birds said so, but because we have a heavenly Father who has called us by name and claimed us as his own. We have a Savior who has taken our sin and our sorrow and our pain onto his own body so that we might be set free. And we have a Spirit who comforts and guides us along the way. And because of that, we know that whatever life throws our way, even death, that everything really is gonna be all right.

Horatio Spafford was a successful lawyer and businessman in Chicago. In 1873, his wife, Anna and their four daughters set off for Europe in French ocean liner. Horatio was to go with them, but had to stay in Chicago because of business so he planned to join them a few days later.

About four days into the ocean crossing, the ship carrying Anna and the girls, collided with another ship and sank. Only Anna survived. Mr. Spafford booked passage on the next available ship to join his grieving wife in Wales. About four days out, the captain called Spafford to his cabin and told him that they were now over the place where his daughters had drowned.

It was on this voyage that Spafford wrote the hymn that we’re going to sing as our closing song. It is only someone who has truly experienced life in God’s kingdom here and now, who can write lyrics like the ones we’re about to sing... “When peace like a river attends my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul.” Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Luke 12:22–24 again. Does anything jump out at you?
2. What kind of things do you tend to worry about? How does that worry play itself out? In rambling thoughts? As muscle tension? Sleeplessness? ...
3. Nature has a lot to teach us about God. Besides learning about God's provision and care from the birds and flowers, what else can we learn about God from nature?
4. Is it wrong to work hard for a good life? If not, what's the difference between being faithful or unfaithful to God in our work?
5. Three times in this passage, Luke uses the Greek word, "merimnan," which is translated as "worry." However, in verse 29, he uses a completely different word, "me meteorizesthe," which the NRSV translates as "do not keep worrying." According to Jim Edwards in his Luke commentary, this is a disputed translation because the latter Greek word literally means "to make oneself high, to be presumptuous." In Greek literature, it's used to describe a ship being tossed and thrown in the high seas. How might a more literal translation help us to better understand what Jesus is saying?
6. In verse 33 Jesus tells his disciples to sell their possessions and instead pursue a treasure in heaven. What does he mean by, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Lk 12:34)?
7. What is one way for you to practice gratitude this week?
8. Try using the breath prayer: Anxious... nothing. Prayerful... everything. Thankful... anything. Peace....

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

It's hard not to worry. What are some things we can do to help each other when one of us is worried?