

Thanksgiving  
Matthew 6:25-33  
November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018  
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Jesus said, "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, 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."."

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We all worry some. Some of us worry a lot. And a few of us fill our lives with dreadful worry. We worry about money. We worry about children. We worry about relationships. We worry about the future. We worry about the past.

During the French Renaissance, some 500 years ago, philosopher Michel de Montaigne said: "My life has been filled with terrible misfortune; most of which never happened."

Worry is closely related to fear when it begins to feel like a churn of negative thoughts and images linked to an uncertain outcome. There is a spectrum that runs from normal concern to brooding that impairs. Some worry can inspire problem solving and promote safety, but some can be paralyzing, fostering feelings of helplessness.

And so, when Matthew's Jesus urges us not to worry about our souls and bodies, it can sound a bit cavalier or naïve. Telling a chronic worrier to just stop is not only dismissive of their experience, but you can bet that the idea of stopping has already occurred to them. So, is there nothing we can take away from this reading?

If we can listen with fresh ears, Jesus points us in a fruitful direction. His advice comes on the heels of a teaching about worldly people who have no regard for holy things and who value only the pleasures of earthly life. Jesus is encouraging his followers to focus on something beyond the material. He knows that his followers will face difficulties and struggles.

They may go hungry and thirsty from time to time. They may even face persecution. And yet, the ancient coping strategy that Jesus offers them is well-grounded in the most current psychological research.

And it begins by practicing the search for God's kingdom and God's justice. In other words, instead of nursing our worries, we can change where we put our attention and energy. Whenever possible, we can begin or return to the practice of looking beyond ourselves for God's grace in creation. The daily practice of cultivating a grateful heart results in spiritual resilience for those times when genuine concern is warranted.

Gratitude takes practice. It's hard to begin practicing when we are already deeply anxious. And yet every moment is available as a starting point. Jesus appears to understand this. He suggests finding even the smallest gesture, the most mundane moments, to slow down our habitual thought patterns.

Watch a bird in flight. Notice how a hummingbird's flight is as delightful as a peregrine falcon's flight is breathtaking or as a heron's flight is comical. Let the flight of birds fill you with awe and surprise. Let it hold your heart open.

Look closely at flowers. Really see the intricacy of a flame lily or the startling white egret orchid. Appreciate the tenacity of a simple coneflower. Spend enough time with a flower to want to write a poem like the one Rainer Maria Rilke wrote about a simple anemone "gradually opening in the meadow morning, as into you the many-toned light of the bright heavens is poured."

"We, violent ones," Rilke's poem concludes, "we weather longer. But when – in which of all our lives – can we finally be so open and receptive?"

Anything in creation that opens us to surprise can become a wellspring of hope. And hope is an aspect of God's life within us. As we express gratefulness for any aspect of creation, we sanctify it, we make it holy, because it is God moving us out of ourselves to notice what encompasses and penetrates our very existence.

A friend of mine, Br. David Steindl-Rast, once said "Only gratefulness, in the form of openness for surprise, lays hold of the fullness of life in hope." The practice of gratitude is what Matthew's Jesus is trying to tell his followers about: all that exists is God's, and God is eagerly waiting to give us more and more – if only we would allow it.

If we choose, we can notice God's creative hand all around us until we trust that God is always present.

A good deal of life, maybe most of life, is out of our control. Choosing to practice gratefulness helps us to be more comfortable with uncertainty. By intentionally directing our attention to seeking God in creation, we naturally get better at catching our thoughts before they hijack our minds and take root as worries.

Once we learn how to notice our thoughts as they arise, the Serenity Prayer begins to make pragmatic sense: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Learning to live a life of practiced gratefulness helps us to choose to refocus. To remember to seek God first because gratefulness reveals God's abundance.

In his influential book, "The Courage to Be," German Protestant philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich suggested that spiritual anxiety was a modern epidemic resulting from a sense of emptiness or loss of meaning in life. He offered courage as the antidote.

Now, *courage* is not the same as bravado or bluster. The courage it takes to remain open and receptive to life, even in the face of death and decay, is the courage of trust in God, the courage of gratefulness. Every time we approach the altar and open ourselves to receive the Eucharistic bread and cup is an act of trusting courage.

And that act reframes our experience of emptiness because we are brought back to what seems a paradox of God's life within us – God's creative acts that bring life out of death.

"At the silent center of our heart," Br. David says, "the fullness of life strikes us as a great emptiness. It must be so. For that fullness surpasses what eye has seen and ear has heard. Only gratefulness, in the form of limitless openness for surprise, lays hold of the fullness of life in hope."

And so, go and see, *really* see, the birds of the sky. Look closely at the lilies of the field. Consider the splendor of the grass. Let them open you and fill you with awe until all there is left to do is drop to your knees in gratitude.

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