

Sermon  
Sunday, October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2024  
Harvest Thanksgiving  
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa  
The Reverend Victoria Scott  
Joel 2:21-27; Psalm 126; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Matthew 6:25-33

Worry. You might have expected “thanksgiving” to be the first word out of my mouth as I stand here this morning. Or perhaps gratitude, or blessings. But no. It’s worry. It’s worry because worry can have quite a grip on us. It can hold us tightly. It can hold us back from thanksgiving and gratitude...

In this morning’s Gospel passage Jesus says: “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear...”

What does Jesus mean when he says “Do not worry”?

Do you know the origin of the word “worry”? While it has come to mean to give way to anxiety – generalized fear – about problems, or potential problems, that didn’t happen until the 1800s. The origin of the word is “to strangle”. This is vivid, isn’t it! There is a tightness about worrying, isn’t there? A grip. Knots in our stomachs. Shortness of breath, even.

When Jesus says “Do not worry”, he is getting at a deep human desire: a desire for control and comfort. A desire to feel that we are in control of our lives, to feel that we make decisions from a place of objectivity and rationality – this runs deep in our humanity. When we feel out of control, we worry. We worry that we will not get what we need or want or desire or deserve. We worry that we don’t have enough, that we can’t do enough, that we won’t be enough. Our reactions to feeling out of control also run deep. Feelings of overwhelm and frustration can lead to behaviour that is unhealthy and destructive: greed, possessiveness, manipulation.

Worry can get in the way of how God intends us to live. It can get in the way of God means for us to be human. Worry can strangle and choke the potential that is all around us. It can hold us back from moving with God’s love and grace at work around us. We heard Jesus say “And which of you by worrying can add a single

hour to your span of life”. This is not a reproach. It is not highlighting a failure if we do worry. It is an invitation to be free from worry’s grip on us.

I wonder if you know Denise Levertov’s poem “The Avowal”? I’ll share it with you:

As swimmers dare  
to lie face to the sky  
and water bears them,  
as hawks rest upon air  
and air sustains them,  
so would I learn to attain  
freefall, and float  
into Creator Spirit’s deep embrace,  
knowing no effort earns  
that all-surrounding grace.

Jesus says: don’t worry. Don’t be afraid. Don’t let the challenges of life strangle you – choke you – and keep you from breathing deeply, from moving freely, from growing, and flourishing. Jesus invites us into God’s deep embrace, and it is in this embrace that we are freed from the chokehold of worry and anxiety. We are all held in God’s deep embrace. We are not alone in this life.

Levertov’s poem says:

“...no effort earns that all-surrounding grace...”. We can’t force our way into it, but God invites us over and over again to move with it. To move with that all-surrounding grace...

I’ve shared some words of Aldous Huxley with you before. He writes:

“It’s dark because you are trying too hard.  
Lightly child, lightly. Learn to do everything lightly.  
Yes, feel lightly even though you’re feeling deeply.  
Just lightly let things happen and lightly cope with them.”

We can move lightly by recognizing that we are held – deeply – in God’s embrace. We can move lightly if we connect and hold one another in meaningful ways.

Connecting, and holding. There is nothing solitary, nothing isolated in any of God's message of love made known in Jesus. The Gospel – the good news of God's love – is about relationship. It is about Jesus drawing us into relationship with God – drawing us into God's embrace. It's not about God "parachuting in" and solving problems, or taking away worries: it's about "God with us", in everything and anything.

It's important to remember that Jesus is not addressing one solitary person in this Gospel passage. He's not saying "Don't *you* – *singular, solitary you* – worry...". He is speaking to a group – a group of vulnerable people. The birds of the air, the lilies of the field are not isolated. Those lilies are rooted in the earth. They drink the rain, and soak up the sun's warmth. The birds feed on roots and shoots and seeds, and spread those seeds and they fly in different directions. There are connections everywhere. And, there are vulnerabilities everywhere. All of creation has the potential to be vulnerable. Those birds and lilies have the potential for suffering just as we do. Care is needed. Loving relationships are needed for humanity, and for all of creation to thrive and flourish. God calls us to care – for each other, and for all of creation. As we are held in God's embrace, we are invited to move lightly and to connect and care for one another. When we care for one another, we loosen the grip that worry can have, and we are all liberated. We are free to move with thanksgiving and gratitude.

Our psalm this morning tells us that: "those who sowed with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves". It is our willingness to float in God's embrace, to go lightly, moving with each other and with our world in loving ways that will turn tears into songs of joy.

The passage from 1 Timothy that our lectionary brings us this morning is a challenging one. It is one that needs a broad perspective. It needs the recognition that it was written for particular people, in a particular time and place. The living word in this passage, for us today, is the call to make supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings for *everyone*. We all need to pray and be prayed for.

Prayer loosens the grip that worry has on us. Prayer is about making room in our hearts and minds. In our Gospel passage we heard “Seek first the kingdom of God...”. This is not a formula or a checklist. Seeking first the kingdom of God is about peeling back layers so that we see that we are not our clothes, or the food we eat. We are not our jobs or our accomplishments. We are love, and we are made to love. God’s love is what shapes us from the inside out and we are made to embody that love in our actions, in our relationships.

When we gather for worship, we are reminded of God with us. We are reminded that we are held in God’s embrace. When we sing and pray and share in the Eucharist together, we have an opportunity to loosen the bonds of worry that hook and hold us, so that we can move more freely when we leave this place. We are reminded to look for ways to connect and hold others, and in that connecting and holding, to move lightly with thanksgiving, and gratitude. So, do not worry. Go lightly and float in God’s embrace, in Jesus’ name. Amen.