



November 21, 2018

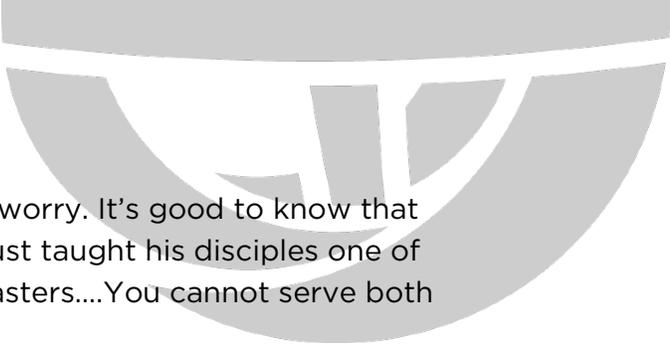
Good News: To Release Worry is Revolutionary Pastor Emily Carson

Matthew 6:25-33 NRSV

²⁵"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? ²⁶Look 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? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But 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? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

This evening's Gospel reading comes early on in Matthew's telling of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. At this point in Matthew's telling, Jesus hasn't even put his whole squad of disciples together yet; he's called just a few of his new friends. He discerns it's time for their first big teaching session and they head away from the crowds.

To paint the scene, they're together and on a mountain side. So when Jesus talks about grass and birds and lilies....they're probably literally looking at grass and birds and lilies. Today's reading doesn't exist in isolation. Jesus didn't take them out to a mountain exclusively to talk about worry. Today's reading is a tiny portion of the teaching session, and it's stuck in between some of the most familiar chapters of the Bible. It's during these chapters of Matthew that Jesus talks with his first disciples about the Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes (blessed are the poor, the merciful, the peacemakers), loving their enemies, and the golden rule. It's also where Jesus gives a bit of guidance about wealth and power.



In today's reading, Jesus focuses in on the theme of worry. It's good to know that immediately before this, in verses 23-24, Jesus has just taught his disciples one of life's most timeless truths: "No one can serve two masters....You cannot serve both God and money."

Immediately after, he says the words, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life."

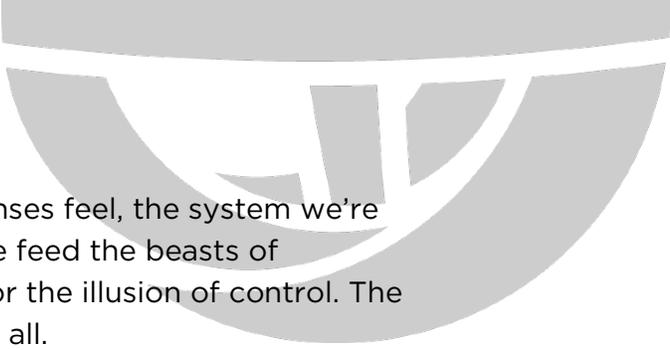
So those words are in response to the reality that he just said something that would probably be anxiety-provoking...a life of following Jesus isn't about accumulation of stuff or attachment or wealth.

Worry can also be translated as troubled and anxious to the point of exhaustion. Worry is apparently timeless...it has been a long-standing reality for humans for a long time. Perhaps the specific content of our worries in Minnesota in 2018 has changed over these thousands of years, but humans have spent unnecessarily large amounts of time fixating to the point of emotional exhaustion for a long time.

In our modern world, we live in the midst of a culture and landscape that actually thrives on our worry...on our discomfort...on our inability to live with uncertainty. That's a lot of what worry is about...it's about what our mind does to resist the unknown. Worry is a way we try to manage uncertainty. Uncertainty is a natural and inevitable part life...there will always be things we don't know and can't predict. But, when we're uncomfortable with uncertainty, our brains start to worry. Worry mimics control. It's a way to satiate that desire to know what's next even though worry doesn't relieve uncertainty in any way, shape or form. It temporarily makes us feel like we have some control.

And what do we do when we worry? When we're uncertain? We spend money. We watch tv. We internalize and blame ourselves for everything. We eat and drink to excess. We compare our lives to other people's lives. We turn inward. We get sucked into a social media vortex. We obsess over the news. We judge. We do all the things that people do when they are worried and uncomfortable with uncertainty. It's not something to feel ashamed about...it's all of us; we are a team of humans and we're in this together. Worry was real for those first disciples that Jesus called, and worry and its implications are real for us. And it's not just an individual matter, we can also think collectively...over millennia...what do groups of people do when they're worried and anxious? What do churches do when they're worried? What do countries do? We....fight. We find an enemy. We blame. We take advantage. We turn inward. We disregard the planet.





Strangely, as uncomfortable as worry and our responses feel, the system we're living in doesn't weaken with our worry. It grows. We feed the beasts of consumerism and individualism. We feed the need for the illusion of control. The cycle continues. And there's worry at the center of it all.

When Jesus invites his followers to let go of worry, he's doing more than offering an inspirational quote. It's more than content for a Facebook post or an embroidered wall hanging. When Jesus says, "Do not worry about your life," Jesus is empowering us to disrupt an entire economic and social system that feeds on our collective anxiety. Releasing worry isn't a feel-good concept. It's revolutionary.

The reality that Jesus mentions worry to his disciples so early on is a strong signal that he recognized just how toxic worry would be to the proclamation of the gospel...to the sharing of the good news...to the ushering in of the coming of God's kingdom as a place where justice, peace and love prevail.

In acknowledging that worry exists, Jesus equips his disciples to become more self-aware and to pay attention to their own emotional states. He helps them understand and recognize that worry is an emotional state...and we can learn to separate ourselves from that space.

So if we're not supposed to anxiously think about the uncertainties and discomforts of this earthly life, what are we supposed to do? What's an alternative?

Jesus says, "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness"

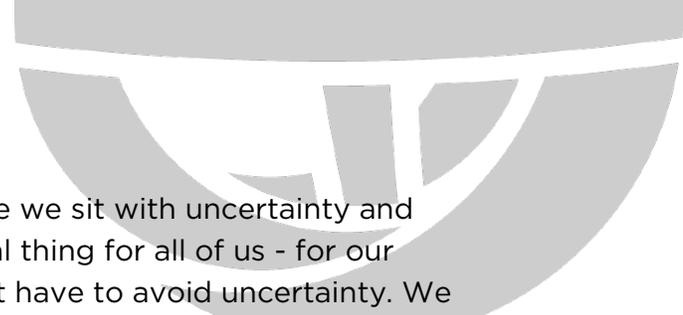
The word "strive" in Matthew's original Greek of this reading is *zā-te'-ō*. It can also be interpreted as...seek, to crave, to look out for.

So the antidote for worry? Being on the lookout for God's kingdom...craving it...watching for it constantly.

So what's God's kingdom? It's love. It's peacemaking. Compassion. Justice. Equity. Forgiveness. Curiosity. When we spend our lives watching for it and working for it and experiencing it, Jesus says we won't need to worry.

In directing us toward the kingdom, Jesus offers us a worry-alternative. He pulls us out of ourselves. He invites us to put that energy toward something productive...welcoming in God's kingdom and celebrating it every chance we get.





The kingdom of God comes into our lives every time we sit with uncertainty and face it. And just acknowledge it. Uncertainty is a real thing for all of us - for our churches and communities and structures. We don't have to avoid uncertainty. We can, instead, look at it. We don't have to go buy something to numb it. Or drink. Or turn on our phones. Or find someone to blame. When we just sit with the reality of uncertainty, we catch a glimmer of something sacred. And worry quiets down.

That's the kingdom of God. That's power. That's kingdom power. When humans do this...when Jesus followers learn to do this, imagine what's possible. That's what Jesus was teaching his friends...learn to do this - learn to live without worry. It opens up so much space. It's the keys to the kingdom. And it frees us put our whole hearts...our energy...our advocacy...our concern on our neighbor. On justice. On love. On forgiveness. On creativity, beauty, compassion and gratitude.

On this pre-Thanksgiving Eve, Jesus gives us this remarkable teaching on worry. He empowers us let it go and be on the lookout for God's kingdom instead.

Thanks be to God that we are not bound to a life of worry.

Thanks be to God that Jesus believes in our capacity to recognize worry and release it.

Thanks be to God that the Holy Spirit is within us and around us - guiding and empowering us every step of the way.

Amen.

