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*Matthew 6:25-33*

*‘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, 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.*

*‘So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.*

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I’ll begin this sermon by saying something that few preachers will ever admit of a particular passage and that is this: I hate this passage. Trust be told, this passage has always left a rather poor taste in my mouth because, and I’ll admit that this is my own anxiety speaking, it comes across as a terrible example of what to say to someone who is experiencing stress. My guess is that if you have felt anxious and have confided that truth to someone you love and their response is “don’t be anxious,” I’d be willing to bet that that wouldn’t particularly help. At best, it would be unhelpful and at worst it would be terribly dismissive of your feelings when you, as we all do, have legitimate reasons to be stressed and anxious. And, because of that, I’ve often wanted to “yell back at the text,” so to speak, and angrily inform Jesus that it just doesn’t work that way; telling an anxious person not to be anxious has rarely, if ever, actually lowered that person’s anxiety.

However, I also believe this to be true: that when a particular scripture evokes strong emotions in me, even emotions of anger, fear, and disgust, that’s often the work of the Holy Spirit nudging me, encouraging me to bring those emotions to the text so that I might learn something or see the text in a new light. And so I did just that this week as I prepped for this sermon. And I learned something that has at least softened my distaste for this passage.

Often, I think what has caused me to respond to Jesus’ telling everyone to “chill out” is that I’ve often heard this passage used as if it is some blanket statement that applies to everyone, in all times and places. But that really doesn’t make much sense. After all, the Jesus who tells us “do not worry about your life” is the same Jesus who makes it abundantly clear to his followers about the hardships that come with discipleship. So this passage isn’t some blanket statement or some sort of pollyanna theology. This is a passage that is often quoted by preachers of the so-called “Prosperity Gospel” such as Joel Osteen, as an example of how stress, doubt, and anxiety are on the opposite end of a spectrum of faith. “Have stress and anxiety? The answer is more faith! That will somehow magically do away with all your anxieties!” Well, that has not been my experience. Faithful people get stressed. Faithful people experience anxiety. Faithful people are worried sometimes. It’s part of living in an anxious world.

This passage comes to us in a portion of Matthew’s Gospel that is typically known as the Sermon on the Mount. However, if we pay close attention to this text, in Luke’s version of this same passage, it is directed not to the masses but specifically to Jesus’ disciples, his inner circle. In fact, it wasn’t even aimed, presumably, at all of this disciples, but a segment within them who Jesus calls “of little faith.”

Jesus is, therefore, not dismissing the anxieties of those who have legitimate concerns about the welfare of themselves or of their families. If our response to the person experiencing homelessness is “Do not be worried! Isn’t life so much more than having a roof over your head and clothes on your back” then we’ve truly missed the mark on what Jesus is trying to say.

Instead, I think Jesus is saying something like this. “I know you’re anxious. Be assured that you do not *belong* to your anxiety. You *belong* to God. And that is a truth that must ground you as you prepare for the work ahead.”

Friends, it’s a question of belonging. It’s tempting to give in to the voices around us in the world that compete for our allegiance, our time, our talent, our trust, our obedience. For we ultimately belong to that which we worship, that which we trust, that which we give our utmost devotion. And, if I’m not careful, I can start to believe the lie that I belong to the church, or to this country, or a political party, or to the banks that financed my student loans, or to the structures in this world that value me only for what I produce or purchase. All of these are false belongings and are lies if I am to take my discipleship seriously. To be a disciple of Christ is to give God and God alone our allegiance. Just prior to today’s text is the part of Matthew’s Gospel where Jesus cautions his disciples against “choosing two masters.” You can only have one, he says. And then he moves on to this passage about worry.

But even if we trust completely in God, this does not provide for us a life free of stress or worry. A Gospel that shames people for feeling basic human emotions isn’t a message that builds up the neighborhood. But what does build up the neighborhood is sharing Good News with those who are in need, and for those of us that struggle with anxiety, there are some things that are proven to help us care for ourselves, our bodies, and our spirits as we navigate a weary, anxious world. Exercise, meditation, spending time outside, journaling, aromatherapy, cutting your caffeine intake, eating healthy, music, laughing, getting better sleep, therapy, medication. You don’t have to do all of these things (thanks be to God!), but it is good to experiment and find out what tools you need in your proverbial tool belt to manage your anxiety so that it doesn’t overwhelm you and drown out the voice that is telling you that you belong - first, foremost, and forevermore - to God!

I’ll close with this theological observation of this text. We often bring to these texts the inevitable lens of Western individualism. However, Jesus is talking to a group of people, his followers, his disciples. And he does not send these disciples out as individuals. Instead, he sends them out in pairs, in groups. He knows that they are heading into strong adverse cultural headwinds. He knows that what he is calling them to do will rub some people the wrong way and challenge societal forces that are deeply invested in the status quo. He know that this is bound to bring about hardships, persecutions, trials, and tribulations for his disciples. Therefore, Jesus is saying to his followers in the midst of their anxiety - as he is to us in the midst of ours - that they and we are not sent out alone.

Therefore, a Christian response to stress and anxiety is that we bear one another’s burdens, as Paul’s Letter to the Galatians puts it, and in so doing fulfill the law of Christ. We strengthen the neighborhood by bearing one another’s burdens and lightening the load as best we can. No, we cannot rid the world of anxiety. No, we can’t change the way people are hardwired and faith doesn’t magically heal every mental health struggle we face. But, when we hear the words of Christ in today's passage, we hear it not just as individuals but as a community, a neighborhood.

*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?*

Jesus is saying to his anxious followers, then and now, that God has placed us within a community where we bear one another’s burdens and do this really countercultural thing: we look out for each other! So, friends, be gentle with one another. Be gentle with yourselves. If you need help, reach out. If you struggle with stress and anxiety, know that you are not alone. But that you are called to be part of a neighborhood where we hopefully remove the stigma that still exists in our society regarding mental health.

And maybe, you - like me - have your days when your anxiety makes you feel like one of those disciples that Jesus called “of little faith.” And you know what? That’s ok. Because the same Jesus who called his anxious disciples “of little faith” is the same Jesus (in this same Gospel, only a few chapters after today’s passage) who says that a little faith the size of, say, a mustard seed, is enough to move mountains.

Thanks be to God for a little faith like that.

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God’s children, say: **Amen.**