

FIRST LESSON: Joel 2:21-27  
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 6:25-33  
November 21, 2021  
STEWARDSHIP SUNDAY

## **“Worry”**

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Someone said, “People with anxiety don't have a train of thought. We have 7 trains on 4 tracks that narrowly avoid each other when paths cross, and all the conductors are screaming.” Does this sound familiar?

Worry. It is a chronic and crippling human condition. Animals don't worry because they don't know what's ahead of them. At least they don't know very far ahead. My dogs figure out we're headed to the vet when we get to the parking lot. Then they panic. But animals don't worry about not having enough. They live in the “now” or the “almost now.” People, on the other hand, live in the “not yet,” the “maybe” and the “what if.” We project in all directions, and drain our energy worrying about things that may never happen.

Today is Stewardship Sunday, the Sunday we talk about what we should contribute to God's work. But we have talked about money a lot this fall, about what we give, or don't give, and how that relates directly to our trust in God. We've spoken about generosity and how we worship a generous God. We've even talked about how the ancient tithe of the Old Testament also covered things that today we pay taxes for, and therefore my suggestion to look at our income after taxes. And I spoke about the importance of percentage giving because it keeps us on track, and not necessarily being legalistic about it being 10%. Today the focus is different. Today's lesson on money is about trusting God and not being overcome by worry.

When it comes to money, many of us are afraid of not having enough, which does in turn affect our generosity, but the root cause is fear, and fear cripples us. Jesus said, “So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” As I say these words, however, I have a little devil sitting on my shoulder saying, *“But some people do starve. Some people don't have enough clothing or shelter.”* And this is true. Bad things do happen in this world. They happened in Jesus' day and they happen now. Jesus was well aware of this fact, but he still told us not to be consumed by worry because worry isn't particularly helpful. It serves no constructive function. Action may help. Crippling anxiety won't. And when we turn to God, God does guide us and provide for us.

Most people in this congregation have not had the experience of living hand to mouth, but some have. I have been blessed to have lived through a number of years in my twenties when money was extremely scarce, not anything like the scarcity of some places in the world, but by our standards, scarce. And yes, I say blessed, because it is the only way that I could have ever really grasped God's provision. Living in Glasgow with a toddler and a newborn our income was so low I often did not know what I was going to feed the family for dinner. And someone would knock on the door and hand me food. Not just once, many times. I never went shopping for clothes for myself or my children because we couldn't afford it. We were clothed via gifts from my parents at Christmas and birthdays and big bags of second-hand clothing that were occasionally handed in. I didn't go shopping. Ever. I couldn't. But I was always clothed. I didn't buy a single piece of furniture until I moved back here. It was always "someone's auntie passed away do you need anything?" We furnished an entire house in Dundee that way. And you should have seen the curtains! They were priceless. All hand-me-downs from the 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s. The heavy brocade of the 30s and 40s was a little easier on the eyes than the bizarre fashions of the 50s and 60s. Did I complain? Of course not! They kept the drafts out! They worked just fine. So, God is not much of an interior decorator, but it all worked. We had a couch in the living room that was so old, so huge and so heavy we couldn't move it, and eventually discovered that the cat had made a nice hole in the back and had a litter there. Rejoice! Life finds a way.

I believe God allowed me, a spoiled American from an upper middleclass family, to experience this level of need so I could begin to grasp God's divine provision. Do I still worry about money? Yes. Like everyone else, I do. But I also have an experience to draw on that reminds me that God has always been there and always will be there.

Our worries are "first world" worries. Compared to the rest of the world we are rich. But in naming the basic categories of food and clothing, by inference Jesus includes all of the material physical things we worry about in this world. We may not worry about having clothes, but we may worry about having the "right" clothes so we fit in at work. We may not be concerned that our kids will be naked, but we might worry about them being bullied at school because we cannot afford to buy them the latest brands. (And yes, this does happen.) We may have food, but can we afford healthy food? And always there is, will I keep my job? Will I find the right job? Will I ever be able to retire?

Jesus was talking about debilitating anxiety, and even we who have so much can suffer from debilitating anxiety. The word in Greek means to care too much, to be overly concerned or anxious. We all have cares, but excessive worry destroys our health and steals our peace. Jesus says if we cannot trust God with the everyday things, how will we trust God with the truly big things? Our lives can be spent obsessed with getting, having and keeping, or be lived seeking God's way in the world. If we truly know that God will take care of us, we are free to care about the things that matter.

Jesus reminds us that our heavenly Father knows that we have physical needs. But God wants us to seek God's kingdom first and God's righteousness. He doesn't say seek ONLY. He says seek FIRST. We live in a physical world. It

is common sense that we should go to work and support our families. The problems occur when that takes first place, when that is ALL we think about. And when many people lost jobs and businesses during the pandemic it was hard to think about anything else. But the only way to eliminate a fear is to replace it. It's no good digging around and trying to haul fear out and throw it to the curb. That just leaves an empty space which very quickly fills back up with more fear. The "just say no" approach doesn't work either. I can try to refuse to be afraid till I am blue in the face, but ironically the more I do the more afraid I get. Fear has to be replaced with faith. And because we are human this is not a once and done. This is a daily exercise.

Jesus says to seek first the kingdom and God's righteousness. These are not words we use in normal conversation. When we hear "kingdom of God" we think of a place like heaven. We think we're dealing with a noun. But this is an unfortunate translation for us because it's really a verb. The kingdom of God is the rule of God. We are to seek God's rule in our lives—to live the way God wants us to live. And the word "righteousness" is not so much a separate thing as it is a restating of the first thing. Righteousness in the biblical sense is when everything works as it should. As my old Hebrew professor used to say, if my car is in perfect working order it is "righteous." Put simply God wants us to try to live according to God's principles. Jesus wants us to focus our attention on what really matters—love, justice, mercy and peace, rather than being consumed chasing material things and living in perpetual fear. And he assures us that if we have our priorities in order, God will meet our practical needs. I can't vouch for the curtains matching, but it will all somehow work. This is the antidote to crippling worry and fear. As Paul reminds us in the letter to the Philippians, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Amen

Joel 2:21-27

<sup>21</sup> Do not be afraid, land of Judah;  
be glad and rejoice.

Surely the Lord has done great things!

<sup>22</sup> Do not be afraid, you wild animals,  
for the pastures in the wilderness are becoming green.

The trees are bearing their fruit;  
the fig tree and the vine yield their riches.

<sup>23</sup> Be glad, people of Zion,  
rejoice in the Lord your God,  
for he has given you the autumn rains  
because he is faithful.

He sends you abundant showers,  
both autumn and spring rains, as before.

<sup>24</sup> The threshing floors will be filled with grain;  
the vats will overflow with new wine and oil.

<sup>25</sup> “I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten—  
the great locust and the young locust,  
the other locusts and the locust swarm—  
my great army that I sent among you.

<sup>26</sup> You will have plenty to eat, until you are full,  
and you will praise the name of the Lord your God,  
who has worked wonders for you;

#### Matthew 6:25-33

<sup>25</sup> “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink;  
or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the  
body more than clothes? <sup>26</sup> Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap  
or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not  
much more valuable than they? <sup>27</sup> Can any one of you by worrying add a single  
hour to your life?

<sup>28</sup> “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow.  
They do not labor or spin.<sup>29</sup> Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his  
splendor was dressed like one of these. <sup>30</sup> If that is how God clothes the grass of  
the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not  
much more clothe you—you of little faith? <sup>31</sup> So do not worry, saying, ‘What  
shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ <sup>32</sup> For the  
pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you  
need them. <sup>33</sup> But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these  
things will be given to you as well.