

TRUST IN THE GOD OF LOVE

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Matthew 6:25-33

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There is a Buddhist parable about two monks, one a Buddhist master, aged in years and wisdom; the other a novice and just beginning his journey of ministry. The two were traveling by foot from one town to another, focused on their devout life of prayer and chastity. At one point, they came to a river with a strong current. As the monks were preparing to cross the river, they saw a woman also attempting to cross. She was tiny, and the river was huge. She was young and beautiful, like a vision from a romance novel. But even her beauty could not help her safely cross the river without assistance, so the young woman asked the monks if they could help her cross to the other side. The two monks glanced at one another, both knowing that they had taken strict vows to never touch a woman.

Then, without a word, the older monk picked up the woman, carried her across the river, and placed her gently on the other side. The younger monk gazed across the river, speechless to have seen his master break the vow to never touch a woman. As the woman went on her way, the older monk stared back at his student awaiting him to cross the river, which the young monk hurriedly did, still speechless and confused about what had happened. After rejoining his companion, they continued on in silence for the next hour. Two more hours passed, still no conversation. Then three, and the younger monk could no longer contain himself. He blurted out “O Master, how could you?! As monks, we are not permitted to touch a woman. But you’ve just carried that woman on your shoulders!”

The older monk looked at him and replied, “Brother, I set her down on the other side of the river; why are you still carrying her?”

Worry can be like that – a burden we carry needlessly. The young monk’s burden of worry far out-weighed the light burden his master had carried to help a young woman across a treacherous river.

When worry haunts us long after its usefulness has passed by, worry is not our friend. When worry and fear linger long after anything bad has happened, worry and fear are no longer helping us. When worry lurks around just in case something troubling might happen, worry can even become our enemy.

And so, Jesus reminds us: “Do not worry.” This simple story of the two Buddhist monks teaches us to live in the present moment. But it’s also a reminder of how challenging it can be to live this lesson. Even a young monk who’s already dedicated to a deeply spiritual and carefully disciplined life finds himself carrying the burden of worry that was not even his to begin with.

It happens. We carry around past hurts or hold onto resentments, even when we know the only person we are really hurting is ourselves. As Jesus reminds us, worrying does not add a single hour to our span of life; more likely, worry will actually shorten our lives and certainly takes away from the quality of whatever time we’re given.

Jesus invites us to make a different choice. We’re invited to let go of what doesn’t serve us anymore and concentrate on the present moment. We’re invited to trust that God’s love is strong enough to sustain us through the whims and waves of life. All of our worrying is nothing in comparison to the love and concern that God has for every one of us. All of our fears are powerless in the face of our mighty God who promises to wipe away our tears and carry us through the most dangerous of storms. Jesus invites us to trust. Jesus invites us to let go of what doesn’t serve us anymore and concentrate on the present moment.

Jesus makes the invitation, but we get to choose whether to accept the invitation. It’s our choice to worry about the past and fear the future, or to simply live in the present with gratitude for whatever the present moment brings. Until we can find a level of peace and happiness in the present circumstances of our lives, we will never be content, because ‘now’ is all we will ever have. Leo

Buscaglia says it this way: “Worry never robs tomorrow of its sorrow, it only saps today of its joy.”

When we’re carrying the burden of worry, it’s hard to live in the present because worry is sapping us of the joy of “now.” Worry diverts our attention, tempting us to forget or even doubt Christ’s promises of care for us. Fear holds us back from making promises of our own, causing us to doubt the Spirit’s trustworthy guidance. Worry can blind us, preventing us from sensing God’s light and steadfast love flowing through our lives.

And so, Jesus gives us a series of images to keep in mind, vivid images when worry wants us to forget. Birds of the air and lilies of the field. I’ve been paying attention to the flowers in fields around my home this week. Oh, I know it’s almost poinsettia season, but Easter lilies came to mind as I read this passage. Lilies can live perennially if they are planted in good soil, so I have taken many Easter lilies home over the years, hoping to see them bloom again and again. When I remember to plant them in good soil, their roots dig deeply into the earth to receive the nourishment of that rich gift – water and nutrients flowing up from mother earth into their stems, their leaves, and their gentle petals. Lilies are beautiful to watch, as they fold up their petals in the evening when the sun goes down, and then open up to receive the sun’s light as the dawn breaks. But the sunflowers in my neighborhood inspire me even more, as they follow the sun as it moves across the sky, turning their open petals to soak in every ray of sun available.

What if we were to live like the sunflowers and lilies of the field? Digging deeply into the soil of Christ’s teachings and prayerful relationship with Spirit, so that Christ the Living Water and Bread of Life can flow up through our weary souls to quench our thirst for God’s presence and satisfy our hunger for God’s love. What if we were to live like the lilies of the field? Gathering our petals close together at end of day, bowing our heads in prayer, and resting our weary limbs as we receive the gift

of nightfall and a good night's rest. And then awakening as day breaks, opening our eyes and turning our minds toward God, soaking in the warmth of God's love. What if we were to live like the sunflowers, turning our faces toward God as we move through our day?

God's love is the powerful light that makes it possible for us to see clearly that worry is just an illusion, that fear is a lurking monster trying to send us back to the shadows. God wants to shine into those dark and dusty places to show us the truth that God is with us. We are not alone. Spirit is on this journey with us. Worry is not the companion who will help us get where we are going. Spirit is. What if we were to trust like the birds of the air, that God's love is nourishment enough for us to soar on the winds of the Spirit and fly where the Spirit leads?

When Jesus says "strive first for the kingdom and righteousness of God," he's inviting us to look to God first, to turn our attention to the One who loves us best, and to follow where Spirit leads. When we do that, God can transform even the most worrisome of days into a day filled with possibilities and hope.

Yesterday morning, Vicki brought this same idea to our Church Council with a devotional she shared. The words sounded to me as if Jesus himself was summarizing today's scripture. Listen, as if God were speaking into the worries of your lives:

*Approach problems with a light touch.... You will always face trouble in this life. But more importantly, you will always have Me with you, helping you to handle whatever you encounter. Approach problems with a light touch by viewing them in My revealing light.**

*Young, Sarah. Jesus Calling. © 2004 Thomas Nelson. <https://www.midlandscbd.com/articles/jesus-calling-november-15-11522>

What a beautiful invitation from God! Approach problems with a light touch. Trust that God is helping us handle the troubles of our lives. Trust that God's love is more powerful than even our greatest worries. Perhaps if we can trust God and lay down our worries, we can actually enjoy the upcoming holiday season. We can trust the year ahead enough to make a covenant with our church, make promises we hope to be able to keep, without worrying about what we don't yet know. But saying we're going to let go of worry and actually doing so are two very different things. So, let's get pragmatic.

There are techniques we can rely on when the worry monster creeps up on us, or we realize we're still carrying a burden that long ago could have been set down?

One of the most basic ways to let worries go is to simply think about something or someone else. When I was a child and couldn't sleep, my mom would read me a fantastic tale from Lewis Carroll or make up a story about a beautiful princess who always lived happily ever after, and her name was always Mary. Childish thoughts, perhaps, but thinking the happy thoughts often distracted me from thoughts of monsters and nightmares. As I grew older, Mom had me think about others in need when I was worried about myself. Praying and caring for others helped me transform my worries into something more worthwhile.

When our son Michael was very small, he came up with another way of thinking happy thoughts, which brings me to a second way to let go of worry. When nightmares or fears crept in, little Michael would start listing everything he wanted to thank God for. Thank you, God, for friends and family. Thank you, God, for my favorite movie. Thank you, God for good health and helpful medicine. Thank you, God, for legos and trucks. Thank you, God, for rain and sunshine. Thank you, God, for food and clothing. Thank you, God for full tummies and fast feet. Thank you, God, for our

country and the people who protect it. Thank you, God, for purpose and meaning. Thank you, God, for Jesus and eternal life. Thank you, God, for everything in the world. So many blessings. So little time to name them all. As the week ahead starts rushing toward Thursday, Thanksgiving Day, if worries start to overwhelm you, take a deep breath and think about your blessings instead of your worries. Count those blessings before you tackle the “to do” list, and the “to do” list might get prioritized a bit differently. On Thanksgiving Day, start your day or your dinner with a moment to list some blessings and give thanks to God. Everyone’s dinner will taste better and the cook will actually have a chance to breathe before the food is passed. Begin with gratitude, and God will be welcomed to that dinner table. With Christ as the centerpiece, even the most harried of holiday dinners or the most stressful of family gatherings can find joy and love flowing more freely.

As you start preparing for Christmas, I invite you to embrace the Advent season that leads up to Christmas as a season of prayer and preparation. Take time to read beloved passages of scripture or the familiar Christmas stories of Luke and Matthew. If you find the worries multiplied and magnified in this season, give yourself the gift of prayer. You may just hear Jesus asking, “Why worry?!” And you could probably give him quite a list of answers. That’s okay. Pray your worries over to Jesus, and let him carry them across the river – or even carry you, if need be. Don’t be surprised if you even hear a phrase whispered in your ear, “Fear not, I am with you.”

My friends, God is right here, walking with us on this journey into the holiday season, just as God is walking with the many people of this world whose lives are even more difficult and troubled than our own. Prayer, scripture, and gratitude can help us remember this. Christ will be present at our table on Thanksgiving Day, hoping to find a warm welcome. The Spirit is breathing new life into us each and every day, offering peace and hope, even when we feel harried and overwhelmed. And

always, Christ is calling to us “Do not worry” even as he promises, “God will take care of you.” So, seek God this week and in the weeks ahead – by giving thanks, by praying, by reading scripture, by praying for others in need, by caring for others in need, by giving your gifts. Each step we take toward God helps us recognize that God is right beside us, carrying us across the river when we need, and helping us to lay down the burdens that we need not carry.

As you seek to let go of the worries that burden you, perhaps the flowers of the field can help. Think of yourself as that lily of the field, or a sunflower following the sun. Let God be the light that guides your day and shines upon your face and see if that nourishing light might just help guide you through a calmer, more peaceful holiday season.

Imagine that young monk, many years later, crossing a raging river and seeing a beautiful young woman in need. He picks her up, carries her across, sets her down, and walks on his way, humming a carefree tune, having finally learned to trust that God’s love is enough to love that monk no matter what rules he breaks and God’s love is strong enough to carry that woman wherever else she may need to go.