

Gratitude Trumps Worry & Thanks Promotes Giving

A Thanksgiving Sermon on Matthew 6:25-31

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Trinity United, Ottawa

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“I tell you, do not worry...Look at the birds of the air.”

It's a good thing Jesus didn't just say “Don't worry!” - and leave it there. Or I might have ignored him. But he went on to offer a really useful suggestion: when you worry, catch yourself and look around you, at the birds and the lilies and all the bounty and glory that is just given. Replace your worried thoughts with Creation's evidence of abundance. Trust that you too, will get your daily bread.

When somebody says “Don't worry!” to me, I clench up. How about you? I'm attached to my worries, thank you very much! I've had some of them all my life! I have my reasons for worrying about practical and personal matters. Well, maybe some of them I'm kind of addicted to. My really regular worries...the ones I rework endlessly if I'm awake in the night. Like my worries for my children. Isn't worrying about your kids part of the parental job description?

Maybe not? It's become clear to me that most of my worries for my kids have been useless. I always worried about the wrong things! At Scripture Circle we talked about useless worries and useful worries. Some of our anxious thoughts and feelings are cues that provoke us until we act - they urge us to do something, change something. On collective reflection, we realized that one of us, worrying about driving on the Queensway at night, was worrying well...till she got the message and made a change. The tension and apprehension she nursed was her body's anxious prodding to stop her from driving on the highway at night. Maybe at this stage, it is just too dangerous for her - and maybe for others. Time to let the kids in Kanata come and pick her up for Sunday supper!

But as well as these useful worries, we all have some useless ones too - the kind Jesus was talking about. The worries about scarcity, not having enough of this or that in the future. Worries that don't "add a single hour to your span of life." Worries that repeat in endless loops without getting us anywhere except more uptight. These useless worries are the hungry, addictive kind that eat up our mental space and are never satisfied. What are *your* mind's favourite worry games?

In this month's Observer there's an interesting article about meditation and brain science. Did you know that our human brain is made to be anxious - designed through evolution to constantly scan for incoming danger? Its just that there aren't a lot of saber tooth tigers around in Ottawa any more. The human brain evolved to seek out something new to latch onto about every 3 seconds. And our worries are always handy...especially in the dark. So we need to teach our brains to relax sometimes and open up space for pleasure and creativity. We can catch ourselves, as Jesus suggests, and stop and look for the lilies. Brain re-training isn't easy, but new discoveries about 'neuroplasticity' make it clear that even old brains can learn new tricks.

Jesus, the great psychologist, suggested that when we start worrying about whether we will have enough of this or that, we do well to rein our brains in to the present moment and look around for something real and immediate and positive to pay attention to, like the evidence of abundance that is usually available in Creation. The well fed birds. The beautifully dressed flowers. Training our minds to gather grace and respond with gratitude keeps us in much closer touch with reality than our scared, scarcity thinking.

Did Jesus understand how replacing worry with gratitude works in our brains? Maybe not. But with the neuroscience of addiction, we can verify the wisdom of his advice. Our worry patterns carve out addictive neurological pathways, that get deeper and faster - like a toboggan hill - every time we replay them. So it isn't enough to find our self at the top of the hill and say stop! ("Don't worry!") Our

brain is going to go somewhere - within three seconds - and the well-worn worry path is mighty slippery. So we have to make a conscious effort to turn in another direction, towards what is actually good and true in the here and now, and tread down a new mental pathway. Each time we do this, we deepen our brain path toward gratitude, and let the old worry way fill in with snow.

Jesus is reminding us to turn in the direction of Creation's glory, God's goodness, the grace of all that is just given to us, bringing bounty and beauty and joy. God is good! All the time!

You may say, rightly, that all are not fed in our world today. But our Christian tradition of worship has taught our brains to connect thankfulness with giving and to respond to God's grace by sharing. In today's emerging Christian paradigm, we recognize that we humans are an integral part of Creation's gracious providing - relied upon to do our part in feeding the birds of the air and dressing the flowers of the field with our actions to sustain Creation and feed the world. As we take our consciously thankful, giving part in Creation's plan, so too, our worries for our world and our children's futures are diminished by gracious action.

As Jesus suggests, whenever worry beckons us down the slippery slope of scarcity fear, we can retrain our brains to head for the real evidence of grace. There *is* capacity enough on this earth to feed all.

Our religious tradition has given us tools to trump our useless worries by retraining our plastic brains. Our practices of praise and thankful prayer, gratitude and attention to God's grace, lead us down the path of just giving. In this season of fabulous fiery colours, big bountiful squashes and feasting at the family table, we have such opportunities to attend to the gifts of Creation, and to take part in Creation's assurance that all can be fed. Each day when we pray we can take part in seeing the evidence - and being the evidence - of the constancy of God's love. We need only look to the freedom of the birds of the air, who can teach us to fly - to

heaven here on earth.

Hymn: More Voices # 42, which you'll be thankful to hear, is not new to you!
"Praise God for the Holy Ground"

Last year we took home Daily Gratitude Journals on Thanksgiving Sunday. Did you practise writing down 5 good things at the end of your day? Did it make a difference? This Thanksgiving, the autumn leaf in your bulletin offers a new spiritual practice you might commit yourself to, in the Spirit of Thanksgiving. Take up this opportunity to retrain your brain! Think of one persistent 'useless worry' you'd like to give up, and pair that thought with one very real to you gift of God or Creation that you might turn your attention to, each time that worry arises in your brain. Write your brain retraining plan on your coloured leaf. Keep it, and maybe share it with someone who might support you?

Happier Thanks-givings!