

Sermon: You Cannot Be Serious!  
Text: Matt. 6:25-34  
Date: February 19, 2017  
Context: WWPC  
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

*“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life . . .*

Matthew 6:25

Of all the self-identified Christian writers I know, nobody turns a funnier phrase in my opinion than our trusted and zany friend, Anne Lamott. Part of what makes her comic broadsides so funny is that they are also usually true, somehow.

For example, in her in her book, *Small Victories*, Ms. Lamott writes:

“Jesus . . . made a point of befriending the worst and most hated, because His message was that no one was beyond reach of divine love, despite society's way of stating the opposite. [Jesus]: what a nut!” (*Small Victories*, pg. 73.)

The same might be said about the author of the passage we just read. Here, in the middle of his first and most important sermon, Jesus tells his listeners not to worry about their lives.

Given who his audience is that’s just crazy talk. Most of the people in his congregation that day would have been subsistence level farmers, or subsistence level something--shopkeepers, domestic servants, fishermen and the like.

When we describe them as subsistence level, we mean that literally. These are people who would have spent much of each day worrying about precisely the things Jesus names: what they were going to eat, how long the line was going to be at the village well and would there be any water left when they got there, how they were going to pay for clothes.

These were very real, very common, very pressing questions among Jesus’s listeners that day.

Not worrying about these daily stressors would have taken a great deal of faith in God's *hesed* to use the Hebrew word; that is, in God's steadfast love and faithfulness.

Which of course was exactly the point of this sermon: to inspire that kind of faith in his listeners, to instill kind an awareness that God was with them and for them.

*Look at the birds of the air, consider the lilies of the field. They are well fed and clothed like royalty. God provides for them, and you are infinitely more valuable than they. Surely God will provide for you.*

That is a profound and lovely theological declaration. Unfortunately that's not our story.

As relatively affluent Americans, not worrying about what we will eat or drink or wear comes naturally to most of us. It certainly doesn't take an over-abundance of faith, just a decent job.

Still, we are not without our own anxieties. It's just that they're different nowadays than they were back then. In more ways than one.

On one hand, you can make a case that our anxieties are a kind of luxury. Being worried about a story you read in the morning paper while you enjoy your breakfast of freshly squeezed orange juice, scrambled eggs and toast is very different than waking up hungry and worrying about what you're going to eat on any given day, or, worse, what you're going to feed your children, or what they're going to wear when their one pair of jeans finally wears out, which will be any day now.

On the other hand, the anxieties produced by these stories we read are of a different magnitude than those day-to-day worries about which Jesus spoke. It's one thing to wonder where you're next meal is coming from. It's quite another to wonder if the nuclear arms race is about to resume.

Which naturally raises the question of what Jesus might say to us here today on the topic of anxiety.

Let's try to imagine how that might go:

“Friends, do not worry about what you read in the paper, or on Twitter or on Facebook about Russian aggression or unrest in Iran or chaos in Washington. Do not let your hearts be anxious about the stories you hear on the nightly news. You have no need to worry. God's got everything under control and everything is going to be fine.”

It's a pretty safe bet that your response might echo that now immortal line made famous by John McEnroe: *You cannot be serious!*

It's not that we don't believe in providence or in God's goodness. It's just that lots of bad stuff, hard stuff, regularly happens in our world. So for most of us, it's the last part of this famous sermon that makes the most sense, that resonates the most powerfully, that reflects how we're feeling deep inside: “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.”

*Well, Jesus, at least you got that right.*

Because here's the thing: the stories we read in the paper over breakfast are not in fact fake news. And they're not trivial. They're serious. So much so that someone told me recently that they want to take to their bed and not come out again until after the next election.

If that's how you're feeling, you're not alone.

Every year the American Psychological Association (the APA for short) conducts regular polls that survey Americans about how much stress they are feeling in their daily lives. These are straightforward polls, conducted annually. Ordinarily they yield rather predictable results: a significant percentage of Americans report at least some level of anxiety about work and money.

No surprise there. But this year was different. This year when the APA released the findings of its poll the results were so striking, so markedly different from the results they normally see, they generated news of their own. They made such a splash the story got picked up and reported by a wide range of news organizations, from the Washington Post to NPR.

While the results were different, they likely will not surprise you. This year, a large percentage of Americans reported feeling much higher levels of stress than they normally do.

This was especially true in the period immediately preceding last November's elections. But results also showed that this high level of ambient stress and anxiety has grown even more acute since the election.

I grant that these results may not be all that surprising. But this is also where things get tricky.

Because in times of high stress and high anxiety, our natural impulse is to turn inward. We start to crave a sense of security, even if it's the comically inadequate security of going to bed and pulling the covers over our head.

This is true of individuals but it's also true of larger groups--congregations, organizations, entire populations.

A pair of iconic New City skyscrapers get attacked and we take all sorts of measures to beef up our security to make sure this doesn't happen again.

Our Commander-in-Chief dispatches the United States military to fight terrorism overseas. Here at home, the FAA quadruples the number of TSA agents working in our airports and makes everyone from grade school children to grandmothers take off their shoes for inspection before getting on an airplane.

Even if you disagree with these policies, the impulse that's driving them is perfectly understandable. But there's also a sense in which this drive to make our country and our lives more secure it doesn't serve us. And it may even make us less secure in the end.

In a recent TED Talk, the playwright Eve Ensler addressed this very dynamic -- how our craving to feel more secure and the steps we take to satisfy that feeling, can have the opposite effect -- a bit like a junkie solving the problem of his shaking hands by scoring a fix.

Here's her take:

“I'm very worried today about this notion, this world, this prevailing kind of force of security. I see this word, hear this word, feel this word everywhere. Real security, security checks, security watch, security clearance.

“Why has all this focus on security made me feel so much more insecure? What does anyone mean when they talk about real security? And why have we, as Americans particularly, become a nation that strives for security above all else?

“In fact, I think that security is elusive. It's impossible. We all die. We all get old. We all get sick. People leave us. People change us. Nothing is secure. And that's actually the good news.

“Unless of course your whole life is about being secure . . . when that is the focus of your life, these are the things that happen: You can't travel very far or venture too far outside a certain circle.

“You can't allow too many conflicting ideas into your mind at one time, as they might confuse you or challenge you.

“You can't open yourself to new experiences, new people, new ways of doing things — they might take you off course.

“You can't not know who you are, so you cling to hard-matter identity. You become a Christian, Muslim, Jew. You're an Indian, Egyptian, Italian, American . . . You become part of an "us." In order to be secure, you defend [this us] against 'them.’

“You cling to your land because it is your secure place. You must fight anyone who encroaches upon it. You become your nation. You become your religion. You become whatever it is that will freeze you, numb you and protect you from doubt or change. But all this does, actually, is shut down your mind. In reality, it does not really make you safer” (Eve Ensler, *What Security Means to Me*, TED.com).

So, what is to be done? How does one manage one's anxieties in a time when the headlines make us want to run and hide under the covers?

In an imperfect world filled with threats to our security, is it possible to engage our faith in a way that helps us feel more at peace, but also keeps our hearts open and our minds attentive to the world around us?

I think the answer to that latter question is: Yes, it is possible. And it brings us back to our text for today.

I happen to believe the counsel Jesus offered to his congregation in that historic sermon still applies to us today. And I think the answer to our question lies in the verbs.

If that sounds too simplistic, I also happen to believe science actually backs me up on this point.

“Look at the birds of the air,” Jesus says. “Consider the lilies of the field.”

In the Greek, these are strong verbs, as in, Look *closely* at the birds of the air. Consider *carefully* the lilies of the field. Pay really close attention.

As we noted earlier, there is a profound underlying theological rationale for this counsel. When you look closely at the birds of the air, then you realize that, in fact, God’s eye is on the sparrow.

And if that’s true, then whether I’m a first century peasant or a 21<sup>st</sup> century American, then it’s also true, it’s still true, that God will watch over me, too, for I am worth so much more than a tiny little bird.

But there is another dimension to this practice too. What you look at closely and consider carefully--these things, the things you see, shape what you believe. And what you believe shapes what you think.

Which then in turn shapes what you see. This process creates a cycle in which you begin to see things selectively, in which you begin to shape facts to fit your beliefs, to fit the story you’re telling about the world and your place in it.

This cycle even starts to change how your brain is wired, making it even more likely that you’ll see and experience and perceive the in a certain way.

If that sounds a little bit sobering, here's the really good news. You can do something about that. These changes in brain chemistry and in how we see and experience the world aren't necessarily permanent.

So here's a pro tip: grab your binoculars and, yes, go out and look at the birds of the air. Look closely at them. Take time to admire the elegance of the Cedar Waxwing. Marvel, as Bruce Cockburn put it, at the spiral perfection of a hawk when it soars. Or the miracle of a hummingbird when it flies *backwards*.

As spring soon begins to bloom, take time to consider the lilies of the field. Take note of the bright yellow forsythia, harbinger of a whole new season: winter is over, spring has begun.

Stop and appreciate, deeply appreciate, the kaleidoscopic glory of the azaleas. Literally take time to smell the roses.

Because when you do that, you're altering the very chemistry in your brain. You're laying down new tracks. And whether you're eighteen or eighty-eight, you're opening yourself up to new ways of seeing the world and your place in it.

But don't stop there. Look at the ways this church is working to make a difference in our corner of the world and consider how you might be a part of that.

Because here's the other thing: today's trouble may be enough for today, but it doesn't mean we can't do anything about it.

And while we may not be able to change what's happening in Russia or Iran or Washington D.C. we can change what's happening inside ourselves. And that is the first step toward living more less anxiously, more peacefully, more fruitfully in the world.