

With Fear and Worry

Luke 12:22-34

August 11, 2019

First Presbyterian, Luling

The air in our household seems to be filled with fear and worrying. Some of it is reasonable and understandable, some not so much. At least in my judgment, though others in the household may disagree with me. Some people in our household, maybe even all people in our household, are worried about Thursday. Because school starts Thursday, which would be enough reason to worry and be afraid all on its own. What to wear, what the teacher will be like, will I know anyone in my class, what fun did I miss over the summer, and all that usual worry about the first day of school. But, in our family, it's worse this year because it's a new school. So take that list I already said and add these things: everyone will know everybody else except me, I am going to get lost on the way to class, everyone will notice me, no one will notice me, no one will ever be my friend, what if people make fun of me and on and on and on and on.

Our household isn't the only one in our country that's fearful and worrying. And it's not just students about to start school who are fretting. It seems to me that there is a generalized climate of fear and worry surrounding us, getting thicker all the time. Every day when we read or listen to the news, there's something else to be afraid of, someone else to be afraid of, some place or circumstance to be afraid of. Some of it is reasonable and understandable, some not so much, again in my judgment.

And then there are things that are more personal: our health—both physical and mental, the health of our bank account, the health of our families, the condition of our home, the tires on our car. We are afraid of things changing and afraid of things staying the same. We're afraid of dying but we're also afraid of lingering for a long time.

I don't think I'm helping matters by listing all this out. I can feel my shoulders getting tighter as I talk! Suffice it to say that there are plenty of things to be afraid of and worried about on a personal level and on a national level and on an international level and right here in the church, too.

And all that fear and worry feeds on itself. Worry leads to more worry and fear leads to more fear. It's also contagious from one person to another. When Anna was a teeny tiny baby, I mean an infant, she would sleep reasonably well Sunday night through Friday night. On Saturday night, she was a miserable, restless baby, awake several times, hungry, uncomfortable, who knows what was the matter. It took me a while, but I finally caught on. What made Saturday night different from all the other nights? We did our

best to keep her to a bedtime routine, but that didn't help. Saturday night meant that both of her parents were a little more stressed out than usual, scurrying around to finish sermons and final preparations for Sunday morning. Even though we didn't think we had varied her bedtime routine at all, her little tiny self had picked up on the increased worrying in the house. When people we love are worried and afraid, we are too.

And even if it's people that we don't know, it's easy to pick up on others' fear and worry. Think about what happens in an airport. People line up for the airplane, even before their group has been called, because they're worried—worried there won't be a place for their suitcase, worried there won't be a seat for them after all, I'm actually not clear at all on what exactly people are afraid of when they do this, but I do know that their worry is catching. Because the more people who get up to stand in line, the quicker everyone else does too.

Worry and fear, and people encouraging us to be worried and afraid, and other people exhibiting worry and fear—it's all around us. I think there is perhaps nothing more counter-cultural at this moment in time that Jesus could say to us than "Don't be afraid." It's right there in verse 32, and I think it's the centerpoint of this passage.

I probably need to confess at this point that I messed with the lectionary. The official reading for today starts with that verse 32, starts with "don't be afraid," and continues on with a parable about being ready for Jesus to come. But I started backtracking to see where that "do not be afraid" was coming from, and then it seemed to me that these verses belonged more with what had come before. So I backed up to verses that the lectionary doesn't include, though it does include Matthew's version of this teaching in other years, and we get to this whole paragraph about worrying and being fearful. And that seemed particularly relevant to us, in this time we're living in. So that's how we ended up with this passage today.

The verses that come before "Don't be afraid" are Jesus telling the disciples not to worry about mundane things, specifically food and clothing. Now, food and clothing were not all the disciples had to worry about, but they were significantly large proportions of what a first century person would worry about. Obtaining food and clothing was more difficult for them than it is for us, so Jesus is not choosing insignificant worries. Food and clothing, along with shelter, were probably the most time-consuming and involved needs that a first century person needed to meet.

I've brought a show and tell today. This piece is from my ancestors. My great-great-great grandmother grew and spun the flax, then wove this cloth which became a cover for a straw mattress. My great grandfather's sister later made the crochet edge and turned the cloth into a table covering. I bring it today as a way to say that it hasn't

been that long ago that simply making a mattress cover, not to mention clothing, was quite an ordeal. This ancestor was born in 1809, so I would guess that the oldest parts of this piece are around 200 years old. Consider how much harder it would have been 2000 years ago, to obtain clothing.

And all that is to say that Jesus was not telling the disciples not to worry about trivial things, which is sometimes how this passage gets interpreted. Food and clothing were big deals. And the disciples were likely much closer to poverty than most of us are. And so these were real, justifiable, reasonable things to be worried about, food and clothing.

And Jesus is telling them, don't be worrying about these very real, justifiable, reasonable things that you worry about and everyone you know worries about. God will take care of it. God takes care of feeding the birds and clothing the flowers, and people are of much more worth to God than birds and flowers, so God will surely take care of you. And in between those two examples is this exchange, which is timeless wisdom, for sure: "And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest?"

This section is not saying that we shouldn't work or earn money or buy clothes or food and sit around passively waiting for a snack to fall into our laps. Jesus is saying that worrying about food and clothing and any number of other things that are real, justifiable, and reasonable worries, is a waste of energy and misplaced priorities and trust. If we put our trust in those things—or more accurately, put our trust in worrying about those things, as if it is our worrying that provides those things—so if we put our trust in worrying about those things, then we are not putting our trust in the ultimate provider of those things, in God.

And then there is verse 32, "Don't be afraid, little flock." This is the only place in the New Testament when Jesus calls anybody "little flock." There are a couple places in the Gospel of John where he says "little children," and the writer of 1, 2, and 3 John uses that phrase frequently. Since this is the only place where "little flock" refers to the disciples, it's hard to determine in any definitive way what he means exactly. But I think it's meant to be kind and caring, an affectionate and intimate address.

He's just told them not to worry, but instead place their trust in God. Which is not exactly easy to do, and if the disciples are anything like me, being told not to worry causes more worry, because now I'm worried that I'm worrying too much and afraid I'm disobeying and/or displeasing Jesus. So I for one am grateful that he steps in to stop that silly cycle of worrying about worrying with "Don't be afraid, little flock."

The final section, after the “don’t be afraid,” returns to things people worry about, this time: money. It’s really a restatement of what Jesus has already said, because worrying about money is just another way of worrying about food or clothing or anything else that money can buy. Money, like food and clothing, is not where we put our trust. Our trust is to be placed in God alone: our trust, our treasure, and our heart.

Being told not to worry and not to be afraid is the most unnatural, counter intuitive, and counter cultural thing we will hear today. But Jesus has given us something to replace those worries and that fear with: replace them with trust in the God who provides. For where our treasure is, there our heart will be also.