

It's always revealing to discover what words or phrases jump out at any given person when they hear a Scripture text read. Whatever it is that grabs our attention generally reveals some insight into where we are at in our lives at present. Anything strike you in particular in our Gospel lesson? Two phrases clamored for my attention. The first phrase comes up twice from the mouth of Jesus: "Do not worry." That statement makes an impact on me, although maybe not the impact Jesus intended. "Do not worry"? Seriously, Jesus? Isn't the least helpful thing you can say to someone who is being overwhelmed with anxiety, "Don't worry"? Has any one of us ever been genuinely helped by someone else responding to our litany of concerns by saying, "Don't worry about it"? And don't we live in rather worrisome times, just as did the original recipients of Jesus' words in 1st C. Palestine? This phrase resonates for me primarily because I'm really not quite sure what to make of it.

The second phrase that I noticed, though, speaks to the birder in me, *and that phrase I love*. "Consider the birds of the air", Jesus says in this lesson. Like birders everywhere, I love to consider the birds of the air. So does my husband, and so do a number of people even within our congregation, many of whom post amazing pictures of a variety of amazing birds. Just about a week and a half ago, Phil and I went birding with Ed and Joanie Lee to the nearby Sax Zim Bog in hopes of spotting a Great Gray Owl. Great Gray Owls are a bird well worth considering, you know. They're unique to our area. They're huge. They're awe inspiring. They're difficult to spot. We were so fortunate as to have Joanie spy an owl as dusk fell, and the owl gave us a lovely window of time in which to consider what a marvel it was, cooperatively flying short distances and posing on branches for our viewing, our photographing, and our wonder and consideration. Here's what I notice when I go birding--peering into brown dense forests trying to catch sight of a brown, cleverly camouflaged bird takes all of my concentration. All I'm doing or thinking about during that time is looking for a magnificent Great Gray Owl. It's one of those mindfulness kind of activities where you put other cares aside and are simply caught up in the moment. That's one of the gifts that comes from considering the birds of the air, as Jesus instructs us to do.

In a little while, we'll get back to those first words of Jesus I mentioned, about not worrying, but for a moment let's focus instead on the Thanksgiving-like theme that this lesson includes, the reason it's chosen as a text for a celebration of Thanksgiving. Our Gospel lesson, like our first lesson, lifts up the way in which God blesses everyone alike through the amazing provisions of God's created world. Specifically, Jesus speaks of how the created order provides resources for food and drink that are available to both humanity and animals, even to plants. Occasionally I hear adults lament that urban children today have no conception that food actually is grown from the earth before it shows up in their supermarket, but I suspect all of us are sometimes in danger of forgetting that! Not only do we take for granted that there is produce in the supermarket, but we may also take for granted that potatoes, carrots, tomatoes and other produce grow in our garden at all. But should we take such things for granted? I mean, *we* don't make anything grow; we *can't*. We plant seeds and tend and hope, but God's order in creation is responsible for the actual sprouting and growth. Wouldn't it be both wise and accurate for us to recognize that God's goodness is transmitted through the natural systems of this living world? Jesus does! And while these are *common* blessings, which we hold in *common* with all who share the planet, that doesn't mean they're not holy and gracious gifts from a generous God. Because they are! A God who provided an intricate and wondrous Created order. Think about food, for example, since Thanksgiving is primarily a harvest festival. Experts suggest that the majority of our food comes from plants that rely on natural pollinators like bees, moths, birds, and so on. So it's not just that we plant a potato and it grows, but that the pollination *required* for its growth is *also* figured into the natural order. Can you imagine how difficult and costly it would be if humans had to mechanically make happen all of the pollination needed in this world for our food to grow? God is in the details! And, God is good, in how God creates and provides food and drink.

Arguably, and in keeping with our typical Thanksgiving festivities, God is all over food! Samuel Torvend, a theologian who wrote a book called "Encountering God with Food and Drink" writes, "Here is another way one might consider reading and understanding the Bible: as the chronicle of the human encounter with God through food and drink." Samuel Torvend makes a good point. In the very first chapters of Genesis, God creates plants and animals and provides food for humanity in that way. Numerous stories in the Old and

New Testament involve God providing food: manna for the escaping Hebrew slaves in the wilderness, for example; or Jesus feeding 5000 people from a few loaves and fishes. Come December 1, the Gospel for our year-long lectionary is that of Luke, which is dominated by stories of Jesus sharing meals with other people, and with people of all types: healthy, sickly, poor, rich, pious, blatantly sinful, and so on. A little thought about how we gather around food yet *today* shows that the Spirit is still present in our meals. Think of how much of our fellowship happens around food....much of it outstanding! God creates food and delights in our sharing and savoring of it; giving thanks to God for the harvest of food at Thanksgiving is absolutely appropriate, and it is an experience of God's blessings for *all* people, something we may hold in common with others. And in this turbulent and divisive world, every patch of common ground is invaluable!

So, having now been reminded about God's provision through the created order of food and drink for the common good, let's return to that repeated instruction of Jesus in this lesson, those words that seem problematic: "Do not worry." Of course, like Jesus, *we* say these words quite often, even though we know they're futile. It's easy to tell ourselves or others not to worry; it's much harder to actually do so. Most of us are worriers to some degree or another. Contrary to what Jesus *specifically* urges us to not worry about in this lesson---what we are to eat and what we are to wear-- we do often worry *precisely* about what we are to eat and what we are to wear! Here's what's so intriguing about this to me: this worry about food and clothing holds true across the socioeconomic arc of humanity. There are some who do literally worry about having enough to eat or having something to wear. Understandably so! But that's not us. We have too *much* to eat or too *many* clothes to wear, and so we worry how to choose wisely from our plenty in order to practice moderation in eating and what to wear so as to appear the most appropriately clothed as possible for any given occasion. Thus, whether we have abundance or scarcity, we find a way to worry! Isn't that so like us? It's such a common human condition, to experience life as worrisome. Worry comes naturally to most of us, male or female, old or young. I've been informally surveying people I've encountered this week as to what they worry about most. The list was significant: worry about family members, worry about health, worry about finances, worry about

climate change, worry about the political climate. Realistically, there is plenty to fear, which certainly can fuel any amount of worry. And yet, Jesus tells us, “Do not worry about your life.” Is that even possible?

Apparently Jesus thinks it is. He holds up flowers and birds-- again, parts of that created order that we hold in common with everyone-- as examples of worry-free life. I guess animals and plants do seem rather worry-free, don't they? I mean, my pets and houseplants don't seem overly worried. And when I spend time in nature, the trees and wild animals also don't strike me as being overwhelmed with worry. Domestic or wild, plants and animals seem to expect and trust that their caretaker, or nature, or God will provide them what is needed. There is a kind of enviable faith and trust on the part of these living things in the created world. Maybe that's why Jesus recommends our consideration of them. Maybe that's why spending time in nature is an antidote to worry.

And finding ways to spend less time in worry and more time in, say, giving thanks as we approach Thanksgiving, may be an admirable pursuit for us as people of faith. The other part of my informal survey this past week was in relation to *antidotes* to worry; I asked people what they did to help them in living out these words of Christ--“do not worry”. I received a variety of answers, and if you ask yourself that question right now, quite possibly your top answers might be similar to the ones I heard. Humor came up as an antidote to worry. Finding ways to laugh can lower our worry considerably. Some spoke of the importance of taking action about a worry or exercising choice in such a way as to lessen the worry. Many spoke of the benefits of spending time in nature, as Jesus suggests in our lesson today, of paying attention to wildlife, to plants, to the sights and sounds and scents of the created world, which are balm to our worried souls. Others mentioned exercise or stretching, physical actions that help our bodies to reset from anxiety. Activities like music, baking, wood-working are antidotes to worry for some. And most in some way referenced faith: whether in the practice of our rituals of faith, or prayer, or turning worries over to God in whatever way worked for them, most people ultimately put their trust in the observation of Jesus that “your heavenly Father knows your needs and provides for you.” Faith and trust in God were often mentioned as ways to avoid worry.

One of the faith and trust practices *specifically* lifted up fits in nicely with our Thanksgiving celebration, and that was the practice of focusing on *gratitude*. Several spoke of the value of keeping an actual gratitude journal in which they jotted down the blessings they experienced. Others said that if they're lying awake worrying, they consciously decide to instead start listing things for which they were grateful. *Gratitude is an excellent antidote to worry*. I'm reminded of the tradition within Judaism of listing 100 things for which one is thankful at the beginning of the new year. I've done this on January 1st now for some years. The value of setting down in writing 100 separate causes for gratitude is that it moves us from the general to the specific. Instead of saying, "I'm grateful for my family and friends", you find yourself digging deeper to say, "I'm grateful for the phone calls I share with my Dad every other day" or "I'm grateful for my friend from childhood that I reconnect with several times a year". Instead of saying, "I'm grateful for good and drink", you find yourself saying, "I'm grateful for the smell of fresh basil, the crisp freshness of cold apple cider, the spicy zing in my hot chili salsa", and so on. The more specific our acknowledgement of gratitude, the better an antidote to worry it is. Because life *is* worrisome; but God is good, and vine-ripened tomatoes are inexpressibly sweet and so is the sticky embrace of our grandchild. The goodness of God is often discovered in the details, and God *is* good. For which we give thanks and put our worries aside. We're of course *not* able to put aside worry perfectly and consistently, but as followers of Jesus we do make the attempt to do so intentionally, faithfully, and trustingly.

I have to wonder if we could apply this precept of Jesus, of worrying less and giving thanks more, to the upcoming weeks. As Christians, we hopefully experience the next months as containing separate and distinct holidays, or holy days: there's Thanksgiving, a national day of giving thanks. Then there's the season of Advent, a time of reflection prior to the day and season of Christmas, the celebration of God's incarnation in human flesh. Then there's New Year's Day, another more generic holiday that greets the New Year. For us, these are hopefully distinct celebrations. But for our culture, as we all know, they are all wrapped up into one generic cause for shopping, overeating, overspending, and trying too hard to be happy: the Holiday Season. Some would extend "the Holidays" back to Halloween, others might hold off until the Christmas City of the

North Parade which happened two days ago, and others until Thanksgiving itself this Thursday. Some of the general cultural holiday warmth and cheer is Godly and joyful, and why not embrace that, if we can? But frankly, much of it can feel more like one big pile of misery and worry. Throw into all of that our own delightful, but labor intensive Julebyen and our congregational Christmas efforts, and it's a rich mixture. Throw into *that* all those worries I enumerated earlier from my informal survey of causes for worry and it's even a *richer* mixture. If ever our spiritual discipline of looking to exchange worry for trust and gratitude will be put to the test, it is in these next weeks to come. Much will seem to shout at us, fuss at us, and rile us up, one way or another, causing us distress and worry. And yet, keep in mind: worry robs us of joy. Christ calls us to instead seek lives that mirror the joyful simplicity of the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, savoring our food and drink, loving our family and friends, doing what we can for the good of others, and giving thanks for our many blessings—all of this while trusting in the provision of our good and generous God. Amen.