

Matthew 6: 24-34 “The Bold Business of Anxiety” Rev. Janet Chapman 3/15/26

Jesus had a unique way of teaching and using his surroundings to illustrate his point. By using the places and sights around him, he could help those who were listening to be in more in tune with this teachings. In our passage today, if you use just a small amount of imagination, you can envision a group of people on a hillside in the height of springtime. There were no chairs or tables, no podium or microphone, so Jesus walks among the crowd as they sat on the green grass and listened. His eye contact would seek out the people’s faces. He would lift up some seemingly unimportant illustration, possibly from the location they found themselves, and expound on it. The wildflowers must have been bursting around them with a display of pale pink, purple, and white blooms; maybe the orange and yellow poppies were protruding from the landscape bringing a display that was utterly vibrant. They could hear the birds chirping in the background, crows squawking loudly and doves cooing gently. All of it provides him with food for thought. He goes on to talk about worries and anxieties amidst all these things they can see and hear.

I confess I am a chronic worrier; have been since a young age. I have carried my anxiety so deep that by the age of 30, I had developed an ulcer and then later a hiatal hernia. I worry about my daughters, my dog, paying my bills, the price of gas, the war in Iran, climate change, the well-being of church people, the state of Redding leadership, our country’s future... well, you get the idea – it’s nothing new. What do you worry about? What makes you anxious? Journalist Eric Sevareid said “The biggest business in America is not steel, cars, or televisions. It is the manufacture, refinement and distribution of anxiety.” Just look at how many commercials in the media are directed at a worry that plagues people’s psyche. Whether it’s protecting our health, increasing our wealth, creating illusions of safety, maintaining a semblance of stability, raising our self-esteem, or building stronger relationships, commercials help make us masters of anxiety, of pointing out what we are lacking and what we must do to remedy the problem. Some of us have been known to worry just for the sake of worrying, as anxiety has become the ultimate curse of the 21st century.

Rick Majerus, former men's basketball coach at University of Utah, once remarked, "Everybody's worried about the economy these days. Well, the truth is my hairline is in recession, my waistline is in inflation, and altogether, I'm in depression." In one of Jack Benny's famous skits, he used to pretend to be robbed. A thief would come at him with a gun and say, "Hey, it's your money or your life – what's it gonna be?" After a moment of silence, the robber yells in frustration, "Your money or your life?" Looking deeply puzzled, Benny responds "Just hold on, I'm thinking." That is the way some are, having gotten sidetracked by priorities which ultimately have no value. So Jesus answers this problem with something which is far easier to say than it is to practice, that is, to trust.

Towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount, we find one of the most poetic things Jesus ever said. He gestures grandly in the direction of two of the most beautiful things on earth in order to make his point concerning the futility of human anxiety. He asks, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" It's a rhetorical question, my favorite kind, with that obvious answer for which you don't have to study all night before the exam; they are sometimes called, "duh" questions. The answer is, "Of course, we can't." "Therefore do not worry," Jesus says and then directs our attention to the worry-free birds and lilies, which honestly, I've never found particularly helpful. As much as I love watching hawks swoop down and grab their dinner from the air, I don't have such an ability. As much as I admire the blue lupines growing at Turtle Bay dog park, I don't have anything that brilliant to wear and if I did, it wouldn't have the same effect if I tried such a thing on. In dealing with my anxieties, the advice to follow the example of the birds of the air and the flowers of the field simply hasn't done it for me... until I spent some time studying it during the past year. At the recommendation of one of my favorite authors, I read a book by Elaine Scarry called "On Beauty and Being Just." Scarry writes, "Beauty prompts a copy of itself." When you see something beautiful, it stops you in your tracks. It makes you want to replicate it somehow – draw it, capture a photo of it, tell someone about it. Not long ago, I was driving and caught sight of Mt. Shasta covered in snow

with beautiful sunset rays of red and orange streaming over it. It was breathtaking. I pulled over and took a photo because it was too beautiful for there to be just one of that view in the world. But then I deleted it because it didn't do the view justice; I decided it was better to just sit and take it all in. I tried to memorize it so that when I closed my eyes, it would come back to me in all its glory. I have no idea how long I sat there in awe of that beauty, but it was transformational.

The other point Scarry makes is that seeing beauty awakens us to what is not beautiful – specifically, to what has been injured, disfigured, cheapened, or debased. As the poet Wendell Berry wrote, “There are no unsacred places – there are only sacred places and desecrated places.” To see a lily bloom in a field of fragrant grass is different from seeing a lily blooming in the ruins after a fire or after overzealous loggers have wiped out a forest. However, the beauty of the one makes the beauty of the other all the more poignant. In this way, beauty is capable of moving people toward the hard work of repair and restoration – because once you have been touched deeply by beauty, in a lily or in a human face, it is difficult to resist engaging the kind of justice that clears the way for more beauty in the world. Once you experience it, as the song goes, you want to “pass it on.”

Yet, I think Scarry's most startling point comes when she asserts that beauty has the power to remove us from the center of the universe unlike anything else. It takes us out of ourselves in breath-taking ways. Artists and philosophers call it “de-centering” or “un-selfing;” people of faith sometimes call it “redemption” or “salvation.” Whatever the word, it is what happens when you are stopped right where you are by beauty, when you give yourself over to it entirely, when you lose track of how much time you spend in the presence of it, when you come back to yourself changed by it – a little or a lot- so that your vision is expanded from that moment forward. You see more, you feel more, you are more. It is a paradox, because when you remove yourself from being the center of the universe, you emerge more connected to everything around you. Jesus said, “Look at the birds of the air... consider the lilies of the field.” As moral as he was, as much as he cared about the blessedness of the poor,

the welfare of widows, the healing of the sick, and the raising of the dead, Jesus seemed to know that what anxious people most need is to get over ourselves for a moment, to lose ourselves in the kind of beauty that loosens our grip on all the things we mistakenly think will keep us safe and secure.

What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear? Beauty doesn't answer those questions for us, but it can make them seem small in the presence of something so luminous, so unexpectedly lovely and generously given that we welcome its disruption in our daily routine... the soothing sounds of a dove, the soaring flight of an eagle, the purple throat of a lily, the sweet smell of a rose. Jesus gives our text today as a commandment, a directive which is meant to save our lives. Do look. Do consider. Barbara Brown Taylor notes that Jesus' sermon has other commandments – Do to others as you would have them do to you...Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth. However, if Jesus' teachings about the birds and the lilies don't stick in our minds the same way the others do, maybe that is because we are still reluctant to value Jesus' instructions about beauty as much as we value his instructions about justice and love. Yet all these teachings come from the same Savior. Some of us have been riveted by the story of Punch, a 6-month-old monkey in a Japanese zoo abandoned by its mom, who was given a plushie monkey to hold onto when it felt anxious and frightened. The other monkeys had initially rejected and even attacked Punch. But after one such attack, Punch didn't run away as much as he ran to the surrogate mom he had found in the stuffed animal. He had found beauty in the soft, cuddly toy which he dragged around wherever he went. Punch turned to the one he had grown to trust to offer warmth, comfort, and security and soon, the anxiety melted away. It occurred to me that we are like Punch when we learn to run to our Creator and find solace in those sacred arms. Contact with the One we love, who has shown us love through the beauty around us, changes us - our trust in God becomes easier. If we can try to do what Jesus asks, if we can let ourselves not be the center of the world, if we can loosen our grip on things we struggle to control, if we can allow beauty to counter the bold business of anxiety, then there is no telling what might happen. Our deeper trust in God and every living being might just allow us to create more beauty, more justice, and even more love. Amen.