

A Single Hour

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
November 20, 2022 – Morning Worship on Thanksgiving Sunday
Text: Matthew 6:25-34

The text we read this morning is a familiar one. It's from what is known as "the Sermon on the Mount" as recorded in Matthew's Gospel. Today's excerpt is but one short piece from within a much bigger summary of Jesus' teachings which Matthew presents early on his Gospel account of Jesus' life and ministry. This is because Matthew wants to be clear at the outset what it is Jesus was trying to accomplish with all his travels, teachings, healings, and miracles. Luke's version on this same summary is much shorter. Known as "the Sermon of the Plain," Luke's version only uses 29 verses compared to the 109 verses Matthew writes to cover the same material. Both of them though have the same goal with their writing: to make clear what Jesus sees as the requirements for the Kingdom of God to be established on earth. This is why it seemed to me to be a perfect focal point for our reflections together on this Thanksgiving Sunday since our religious predecessors, the Pilgrims and the Puritans, had exactly this as their goal in coming to the new world we call home. This particular goal proved both problematic and elusive to them which was actually a good thing. It continues to be so today but that goal is not what I want us to ponder together this morning. No, today I want us to reflect on Jesus' thoughts about worrying, a reality for all of us I know.

Our text this morning comes almost exactly in the middle of Matthew's long discourse. Interestingly, this lesson Jesus teaches about the futility of worrying comes immediately after his admonitions against the pursuit of wealth to the exclusion of all

else in life. This seems especially appropriate to us this year as inflation is a growing concern and worrying about having enough seems to be a preoccupation of most of us these days. Let's face it, we are all worried about money and it doesn't seem to matter whether we are comfortably well off or worrying about making the next car payment. I mean, for goodness sake, even Elon Musk is worried about money as his gamble on the purchase of Twitter implodes. Smart as he is, he seems to be learning the hard way that the engineering which created the Tesla is not translating well at all into a social media platform that was hemorrhaging money before he bought it. But that is a story, and maybe even a sermon, for another day! What I'd like us to focus on in this beautiful text from Matthew are Jesus' comments about worrying.

Let's face it. Heading into the recent midterm elections was a massive exercise in unchecked and unrelenting anxiety. It really did feel as though the future of our democracy was at stake in more ways than one. Interesting here is that neither a "red wave" nor a "blue wave" materialized. Instead, the election revealed quite clearly what the major concerns of most Americans are – for everything to just calm down! Enough already with the crazy! We are all just done with crazy. We're done.

This is only to be expected after the last several years we've lived through. Divided government making real progress on important issues virtually impossible. Increasingly vitriolic and even violent rhetoric leading to everything from a violent insurrection at our Capitol to increased hazing incidents at local high schools in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. The housing crisis is pushing more and more people into homelessness. Wages have gone up, only to be outpaced by inflation. And Covid. Of

course, we can't forget Covid. All of our lives totally upended for almost two years. Who could have believed that would even be possible. Yet it happened and we lived through it although so very many didn't. Yet, things are finally better in that regard at least. For many of us this will be the most normal Thanksgiving we have been able to enjoy with family and friends in more than two years. But, if we're honest, that fear still lingers. Covid is still around. Along with flu and now an unexpected surge of RSV. Hospitals are filled to capacity still. And news of layoffs trickles into the evening news. Anxiety, worry, is never far away – no matter how much we would love to just walk away from it.

Jesus makes it sound in today's passage like that's all we should do. Just recognize worry for what it is – pointless, futile, literally a waste of time – and walk away from it. "Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" he asks poignantly. I am sure all those folks gathered at his feet on that hillside immediately thought – "Yes! Yes, it is more than that!" Or ... maybe not. Maybe they reacted just as we would to such Pollyanna advice. Maybe they thought, "I get your point, Jesus, but my kids go hungry too many nights. My taxes to these God forsaken Romans just keep going up and up. I worry what's going to happen!" Still, Jesus continued on. "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" As the people watched the birds fly overhead, they tuned in on his words. "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?"

Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life. The obvious answer is, of course not. And yet, dear ones, we

live too many moments of too many days acting as though the opposite is true. We worry constantly. We all do. I think worrying is hard-wired into who we are as humans. It comes along with the ability to think, to reason, to be aware of what's happening in the world around us. "I think therefore I am" Descartes proclaimed in the 17th century. ¹ "I think therefore I worry" seems an apt description of life for most of us in these first decades of the 21st century. And why wouldn't we. Look at all there is to worry about, most of which has only been heightened by what we've just been through during these Covid years. Inflation, war, food shortages, crazy weather, global warming, over-development, under-development of affordable housing. And so on, and so on... "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" Jesus asks you and me. We know he's right. We know it! But then we must honestly answer him what's in our hearts, "how can we *not* worry? How can we not worry about all these things we know are so very wrong and most of the time seem only to be getting worse? Tell us Jesus, how do we not worry when there is so very much to worry about? How is that even possible?

Well, let's try to imagine his answer to this, our very real question. Our very legitimate question. First, I imagine Jesus getting very quiet and just looking deeply into our eyes. He takes a deep breath and slowly breathes it out, somehow inviting us to do the same. Then he smiles and begins to talk oh so softly. "Of course, you worry because there is so much to worry about. I know that. God knows that which is the whole point. God knows what is going on in the world. God sees what you see, feels what you feel. God knows your fear. God knows your anxiety. The

¹ <https://philosophybreak.com/articles/i-think-therefore-i-am-descartes-cogito-ergo-sum-explained/>

thing is, God is inviting you to give your fears, your worries, your anxiety to God. God is asking you to trust enough in God's unbounded and unrelenting love for you to let go of your white knuckle grasp on everything that frightens you, worries you, and give it into His tender care. God knows that you need all these things which consume you with worry. What God is asking you is to trust that God knows what you need and that somehow, some way – probably not as you might expect it – you will have those needs met. And even if that doesn't happen for some reason because God is not a cosmic order-taker who magically removes all problems from life – even then, you are not to worry because whatever happens, God is there with you in the midst of it. That's it. That's all."

But as anyone who knows anything about worry and anxiety can tell you, it is virtually impossible to just stop worrying cold-turkey. A worrier can't not worry. It's not possible. Unless... Here's the thing. You may not be able to stop worrying, but you can fill your life up with other things so there is just not so much room in your mind or your heart for worrying all the time. How do you do this? Easier than you might think. Jesus even points it out right in this same text: "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well." Say what? What the heck does that mean? It means get out of your own head and do something for someone else. Help someone else. Volunteer at a soup kitchen or a food pantry. Sing in the choir or learn the tone chimes. Check in on people who might be lonely and stuck at home. Making phone calls, writing cards and notes – this is something anyone can do. Check out volunteering at the hospital or a local senior center or nursing

home. Become a literacy volunteer. In short, you can stop worrying by giving it less real estate in your head and your heart.

Another important thing is to be kind to yourself. I mean, let's be honest, sometimes we worry about our worrying. This is when you know you really are worrying too much. When your default setting each morning is to identify something to worry about – like when it's a beautiful morning and you find yourself worrying about the bad weather than might come along later in the week – that's when it's time to take a deep breath and do something nice for yourself. Take a walk. Sit down and have a cup of tea for no reason other than you want to. Pick up that book you've been wanting to read. Be kind to yourself. Like Jesus would be. Never forget that Jesus loves you so there is absolutely no good reason not to love yourself. Be kind to yourself. It makes it easier to be kind to others. And in being kind to others, you will find less space in your life for worrying. Never forget that you cannot ever add even one hour to your life with worrying. In fact, you lose every minute you worry forever. It is gone. And in this beautiful life, we deserve to savor every minute. That is what God has always wanted for you and that never, ever changes.

So, dear ones, hold on to those minutes, those hours you have wasted on worrying. Instead, hold on to them for yourself as hours to spend on loving your friends and family. Give them back to God by being kind to others whenever you are able to. This is truly what it means to be thankful, to live with an attitude of gratitude. It means surrendering your worries to God so that you can live fully this beautiful life with which God has gifted you. As you sit down for your Thanksgiving celebration this year, whatever that might be for you, lay all those worries down before

you even come to the table. Instead, bring with you these wonderful words of advice from Jesus himself: “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

May your Thanksgiving blessings be many and your troubles nonexistent, even for just that one day. A single hour, a single day gifted back to you by God in exchange for everything you are worried about. How amazing might that be. Please, make the effort to find out. Happy Thanksgiving. Amen.