

Striving for the Kingdom

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
November 19, 2023 – 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 Jesus was trying to accomplish with all his travels, teachings, healings, and miracles. Luke's version of this same summary is much shorter. Known as "the Sermon on 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 summaries of Jesus' key teachings: to make clear what Jesus understands 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 now call New England.

Our text this morning actually has as its primary focus a topic of keen interest to the people of Jesus' time and to us still today, the futility of worrying. It comes almost exactly in the middle of Matthew's long discourse. Interestingly, Matthew places this part of Jesus' sermon about the futility of worrying immediately after his admonitions against the pursuit of wealth to the exclusion of all else in life. This placement gives us a very important clue as to the role that wealth plays in the Kingdom of God which is none. Nada. Zilch. Yet most of us are continually worrying about having enough financial stability. Do we have enough savings? Should we splurge on that

vacation, that new car, that remodeling we've been thinking about? Let's face it, money worries are a fact of life, and it doesn't seem to matter if we are comfortably well off or worrying about making the next car payment

But money isn't the only thing we're worrying about these days. If only! The days when all we had to worry about was money seem far in the past. No, these days we worry about global warming and the resulting crazy, dangerous weather. We worry about gun violence and violence in general becoming all too commonplace. Just this past week there were physical altercations between two members of the House of Representatives and between a US Senator and a witness testifying at a hearing. It's literally crazy! Added to this in recent weeks has been yet another mass shooting in nearby Maine and how can we forget the horrors of the war unfolding every hour in Gaza. The violence of this war in response to the atrocities of October 7 are themselves causing unrest in our own country and around the world as students and others protest the huge casualties being endured by innocent Palestinians even as Hamas terrorists hide in their midst. It's a first class hot mess, one I am sure is keeping a lot of college and university administrators up at night because this is one time when there is no clear right and wrong answer. Unlike the conflict in Ukraine where Russia invaded another sovereign nation without cause, in Gaza a terrorist group attacked Israeli border settlements and then ran back into Gaza to hide among the Palestinians carrying 200+ hostages with them, ensuring Israel's fierce response. Dear ones, how can we not be worried about these two conflicts and the attacks on simple human decency they both embody? What if these wars spread beyond their borders and the entire world slips into armed conflict? This worry is one I have thought about more than a little and I'm guessing you have too. Simply put, dear ones, there is a

LOT of real serious stuff to worry about these days. So we have to ask ourselves, what's up with this text where Jesus is telling us not to worry but instead "to strive first for the Kingdom of God." Say what now?

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 more closely. "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

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

by recent events. 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, “but Jesus, 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?”

Before we consider Jesus’ answer to this question, I want to share with you a bit about one of my favorite scenes from one of my favorite movies. No surprise, it’s a Tom Hanks movie released in 2015. This one, *Bridge of Spies*, is set the late 1950’s and tells the story of James Donovan, Rudolf Abel and Francis Gary Powers. James Donovan, the role played by Hanks, was a well known attorney in New York City and had been one of the prosecutors at the Nuremburg trials in Germany at the end of World War II. Rudolf Abel, played by Mark Rylance, was a Soviet spy caught and put on trial for espionage in NYC. Donovan was tapped by the NY Bar to defend Abel because the federal government wanted to showcase the American legal system where someone is considered innocent until proven guilty. Donovan took his responsibility very seriously and once Abel had accepted him as his attorney they began to talk. Throughout their conversations, Abel never became upset or flustered or angry. He was always calm, seemingly unflappable, and ready for whatever judgment ultimately came his way. At one point, Donovan asks him if he wasn’t worried since he could be executed for treason if he was found guilty. Abel looks at him, calm as always and says, “would it help?” Would it help? That is the real question we should all

be asking ourselves every time we realize we are worried about something. Does our worrying help? Does it solve whatever it is we are worrying about? Does it make anything better? Nope. Yet, still, we worry. Unless we're Rudolf Abel or someone like him.

Here's the thing about Rudolf Abel. He was convicted and Donovan appealed his conviction all the way to the Supreme Court where he almost won. But, he didn't. And yet, things turned out just fine for Abel. In fact, he eventually got to go back home to the USSR. How did that happen? Well, when Francis Gary Powers was shot down in his spy plane over the Soviet Union, the US needed someone to trade for his release. That was Rudolf Abel who was not executed because Donovan was successful in getting him sentenced to life in prison, just in case they needed someone to trade in case one of their own spies was captured. It was Donovan who brokered the trade of Abel for Powers and Yale graduate student Frederic Pryor who had been arrested in East Germany on the wrong side of the wall. It's an incredible story, really, in so many ways and if you haven't seen it, I heartily recommend it. Abel lived out the rest of his days with his wife and daughter in the USSR, a testimony to everyone that good things can and do happen if we dare not to worry.

But really, is that even possible? Well, let's try to imagine Jesus' answer to Abel's question to Donovan. "Would worrying help?" No, it doesn't, Jesus would answer but he wouldn't stop there. Continuing on, I imagine Jesus saying something like: "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. That's why 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.” Still, Jesus would want us to remember that God is not a cosmic order-taker who magically removes all problems from life. Even then, Jesus reminds us we are not to worry because whatever happens, God is there with us in the midst of it, whatever it is.

However, 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. Yet, 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.” 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. It absolutely does not help. 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 us and that never, ever changes. This is what it means, what it’s like to strive for the kingdom of God.

So, dear ones, hold on to those minutes, those hours you have wasted on worrying. Give them back to God by being kind to others whenever you are able to. This is 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, set all those worries aside 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 may you set your worries aside as you count them. May you rediscover with joy what it means to strive for the kingdom of God on earth by investing your energies in doing something for others just because you can. Hold on

to Jesus' promise that each day is a gift to you from God. How amazing is that! Happy Thanksgiving! Amen.