

Letting Go of Worry
Matthew 6: 25-34
Pastor Todd Smith Lippert
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I worked on this sermon with this song of Bob Marley playing in the background. I played it over and over again as I was writing. It felt good.

According to Wikipedia, The source of Marley's inspiration for the lyrics of "Three Little Birds" were three birds that Marley was fond of, that used to fly and sit next to his home.^[1] Tony Gilbert, a long time friend of Marley, was present at the time he was writing the song and elaborated, "Bob got inspired by a lot of things around him, he observed life. I remember the three little birds. They were pretty birds, [canaries](#), who would come by the windowsill at Hope Road."^[1]

Bob Marley and Jesus are doing the same thing. Both are observing the gifts of creation and drawing conclusions. For Bob Marley, the beauty of the canaries and their song was comforting, inspiring, calming. The beauty of creation, the mystery and miracle of it all, overwhelms worry with its majesty. Laid back Jamaican culture doesn't hurt either.

Jesus adds in some logic. "Look at the birds of the air," Jesus says. "They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet God feeds them. Aren't you valuable too?" Have you noticed that this is all grace, this is all gift? Have you noticed that God gives gifts to the birds. Have you noticed how extravagantly God is throwing gifts around? It's like a blizzard of gifts and grace out there, you'll run into some sooner or later. It's already swirling around you even if you can't see it right now. Don't worry about it.

Jesus invites us to trust God's providence. Jesus invites us to see a world of grace, and to trust this generosity.

I think the last verse in this passage is interesting too. "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

This sounds like what we expect to hear from an Eastern religious tradition, essentially, “stay in the moment.” One of my favorite books is by Buddhist Monk Thich Nhat Hahn. The title is *You Are Here: Discovering the Magic of the Present Moment*.

Thich Nhat Hahn says, “You are here for life; and if you are here for life, life will be here for you. It’s simple. We must practice resurrection, and this is an everyday practice....It is necessary to come back to the present moment in order to touch life in a deep way. For me the Kingdom of God is where mindfulness exists, and it is a kingdom where there is compassion. The Kingdom of God is not a place where there is no suffering. It is only when enter into contact with suffering that understanding and compassion can be born.”

There will still be worry and good reasons to worry. But Jesus says, not only, trust in God’s grace, but he also says, “stay here, in the moment, today. These will both be helpful.” Trust in grace, stay in the moment.

For as long as I can remember, worry has taken up considerable space in my life. But over last ten years or so, worry has been taking up a little less space in my life. This may be because I’m simply getting older and maturing. (family of mine may question that I’m really maturing). Over the last ten years though, I’ve also been dabbling with Centering Prayer, a Christian form of meditation.

I’d go in spurts, practicing for once a week, practicing a few days in a row and then not practicing again for month. Even with this very intermittent practice, there were times when it felt like the edge of my worry was being taken off. This fall, though, I decided to practice Centering Prayer every day for three months.

I was reading some results of scholarship on long term benefits of meditation. Scholars are finding that the mind can be trained and physically modified in profound ways through meditation.

Barbara Fredrickson has shown that eight weeks of meditation on altruistic love, at a rate of 30 minutes per day, increased positive emotions. Subjects felt more positive emotions: more joy, kindness, gratitude, hope, and enthusiasm, and the longer the training was, the more marked

were the positive effects. Open presence meditation, which is similar to Centering Prayer, letting your mind rest in a clear state, produced similar results. Researchers also established that “a few weeks of meditation, at the rate of 30 minutes per day, already induced significant changes in cerebral activity, the immune system, one’s quality of attention, and many other parameters.”

“All right I’m in,” I decided. I’m ready to focus on training my brain. I decided to meditate every day for 20 minutes per day. I didn’t do 30 minutes because that seemed like more time than I could invest in my brain. I did pretty well. I missed 6 or 7 days over those three months. I didn’t always enjoy it. Sometimes I was pretty bored, the same way I might not want to complete a workout. But I noticed some things.

There were a few moments where something happened during the course of the day that was painful, the situation weighed on my mind, I was worrying about it. I had intense feelings. Then 6-8 hours later, or the next day, I realized, “oh, that isn’t bothering me anymore, or those feelings aren’t as strong.” I also thought, “this is different than a year ago. This still would have been bothering me a year ago.” I had another instance where something happened that was weighing on my mind. It didn’t wake me up in the night, but worrying about it kept me from going to sleep right away. The next morning we were celebrating the birthday of a family member. I was excited about the birthday. I thoroughly enjoyed the celebration, had fun from beginning to end. As Thich Nhat Hahn would say, “I was there for life and life was there for me.” Later that afternoon I started worrying about the thing again. I thought, “oh, I wasn’t worrying about this at all during the celebration. That’s new. I don’t remember being able to stop my worry for a celebration before. Normally, I’d worry right on through it. I’d nod and smile, but most of me would be somewhere else.”

This is anecdotal but it seems to fit with what the research says. When I think about it, what I’ve been practicing for 20 minutes a day is letting go. I’ll sit and focus on my breath and say the my sacred word, “love” as I breathe out, and soon the thoughts will come back. I’ll start thinking about all the things I should be doing instead of sitting. I’ll wonder if this is the week I won’t come up with an idea for a sermon. Then I realize I’m thinking, and I stop, let those thoughts go, focus on my breath again and say my sacred word. I end up letting go, over and over and

over until the 20 minutes is up. I practice letting go in the same way I practiced the trombone every day, like I practiced my jump shot. It makes sense that I'm getting a little better at it.

If I think about Centering Prayer through a Christian frame, What I'm doing is practicing trusting in grace, which is what Jesus is talking about. I'm practicing stopping and resting in God, even in the middle of a busy day. Even then, I can place my thoughts and worries aside for a while, and trust that I will receive what I need later. There will still be time, ideas, whatever it is. I can rest now and practice trusting now.

I hope to continue Centering Prayer as a daily practice in the same way I hope to keep exercising regularly. If you would like to try Centering Prayer there is a group that meets here Tuesday - Friday from 12:00 - 12:30. You can find resources online too.

I'll close with two thoughts. First, last week Pastor Abby was talking about floating. Maybe it isn't sinking or swimming with God, but floating, trusting that there is a buoyancy that will hold us up as we go into the unknown. To me that sounds like the words of Christian mystic Julian of Norwich. She said, "All shall be well, and all shall be well. And all manner of things shall be well. For there is a Force of love moving through the universe that holds us fast and will never let go."

Again today, Jesus assures us there is grace, and invites us to trust. Amen.