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“Why Worry?”

a sermon preached by the Rev. Abigail Henderson at First United Church of Christ in Northfield,
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Luke 12: 22-34

My dear friend Leah once told me this story.

When she was a little girl, she was very anxious. There was a lot of tough stuff happening in her family, and she was one of those sponge-like kids who just soaked it all up. Every weekday, her father left home to go to work. Leah and her father had a strong bond, and it was hard to see him go. As the hours passed, and her father’s return drew immanent, she actually grew *more* anxious. At dinnertime, she would stand at the window, full of dread that *this time he wouldn’t come home*.

Leah told me that she believed, in her child imagination, that if she worried enough about something terrible happening—well, it wouldn’t, it just *couldn’t* happen. That would be too... weird. Too ironic. (She may not have had the term “irony,” but in her bones she understood the concept.) This is a normal stage in early childhood development—the belief that your own thoughts and feelings have the power to influence outside events and change the narrative. Psychologists call it “magical thinking.”

So Leah would worry about her dad like it was her job—because in her mind it was. And then—*sweet relief*—she would see his car pull into the driveway, and he’d get out and wave at her through the window. The emotional release she felt was intoxicating, washing the anxiety clean out of her body.

Until the next day, when the cycle repeated itself.

Thus it became Leah's secret duty to make sure her father came home. Even as she grew older and more rational, some part of her still believed that she played some mystical role in her father's safety. It turns out that magical thinking isn't limited to childhood.

As Joan Didion described in her memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking*, adults are equally susceptible, especially in times of high anxiety and trauma. Didion writes about how, even after witnessing her husband John's sudden death, his funeral, and the committal of his ashes, she simply could not give away his shoes. Why? *Because he might need them.* As long as she held on to his shoes, she allowed for the possibility of John's coming home.

Was she irrational? Yes. Grief-stricken? Of course. But also very, very human.

Anxiety and its related symptoms are well known to all of us. Some struggle with it more than others. For some, anxiety is a medical diagnosis requiring support and treatment. For pharmaceutical companies, anxiety is a multibillion-dollar industry. For many—for our culture at large—anxiety is the constant undercurrent to our lived experience. There is a lot to worry about, after all. The stock market, climate change, terrible violence in Egypt... the list goes on. And of course, each of us carries our own personal set of burdens, involving our own families, our own trials, our own basic livelihoods. If I continued, I could give us all a collective anxiety attack! Which is exactly why you came to church, right?

I know, I know. You probably came to church seeking comfort, relief... hope. And, well, our Gospel reading purports to offer some.

This is a familiar text—those lilies of the field are well considered, I think. I remembering discussing them at the Bible Study I led at Old South Church in Boston, where I interned during divinity school.

My group was composed of some very successful people—"Solomons clothed in glory," if you will—people who'd achieved great things professionally and personally. But let me tell you, rather than feeling comforted, they *wrestled* with this passage. How would this message sound, they wondered, to people who *truly* struggled to feed and clothe themselves? To the homeless men and women who begged outside the church during the day and slept beneath its awnings at night? To people living with chemical dependency or mental illness? To people suffering terrible, traumatic grief?

For that group of readers, the lilies connoted false optimism, unrealistic expectations, and judgment against people *with reason* to worry—which is actually *all of us*, in one way or another. Have you ever, in moments of high anxiety, been urged to simply “stop worrying” or “let it go”? Yeah, it doesn’t help.

I think my Old Southerners were onto something, or the beginning of something. I appreciate how they refused to read those words as addressed merely to them or people like them. I appreciate how they took the time to consider how privilege shaped their understanding. It is quite easy to claim that life is more than food, and the body more than clothing, when you have an abundance of both. My study group didn’t really presume to know how person impoverished in body, mind, or spirit would experience the text; they simply acknowledged that the question flabbergasted them.

And you know, I like to think that Jesus would resonate with that reaction. He would resonate with it because he understood that we have a very complicated relationship with our stuff. He knew that we need food and clothing and other things, not merely to subsist but to gain satisfaction in this life. But he also knew that food and clothing and other things give us a false sense of security. They can give us the impression that we’re somehow “good” or “deserving” because we’re doing all right. That’s another kind of magical thinking—the notion that we are not vulnerable, that “it”—it being a whole range of misfortunes—won’t happen to us. Of course it can happen to us. And sometimes, through the calamities of life, we learn that; and other times we don’t. But never for a moment let us think we aren’t all in this together, no matter our lot in life.

Jesus’ ministry involved breaking down what he perceived as false barriers between people—male and female, Greek and Jew, rich and poor. To that I might add, lucky and unlucky. It wasn’t that he didn’t recognize difference, but that he challenged everyone’s notions about what those differences meant in the eyes of God. Like the Hebrew prophets, Jesus preached solidarity with the hungry and the poor, with the widow and the orphan. And such solidarity is impossible if you’re trying to serve two masters—God and wealth.

Indeed, I think this entire “Lilies” passage is not really about worry in general, but rather a specific kind of worry—an inward-looking worry that convinces us there is not enough to go around, that we must fight for our portion, that we must hold on tightly to life as we know it.

This is the kind of worry that allows, in general, for the rich to remain rich and the poor to remain poor. Listen to Jesus' words:

“And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.”

I don't think Jesus wants us to neglect basic human needs for the sake of loftier more spiritual preoccupations. Rather, I read this as a rallying cry to feed and clothe *all* people. For that's exactly what God's Kingdom is, according to our sacred texts: it is that time and place when all God's creatures are safe and sheltered, their tears wiped away. In God's kingdom, everyone is fed and welcomed to the table. In God's kingdom, death has died, and all that is lost is found.

Sounds wonderful, doesn't it?

Magical, even?

In my mind, faith is ultimately an act of the imagination. A kind of magical thinking that gives life and hope. Consider this credo by essayist and Unitarian minister Robert Fulgrim:

I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge —

That myth is more potent than history.

I believe that dreams are more powerful than facts —

That hope always triumphs over experience —

That laughter is the only cure for grief.

And I believe that love is stronger than death.

Now, I know we have some professors and scholars in the room, so allow me to disclaim that I personally am a strong supporter of knowledge, history, and facts. But let us acknowledge this—sometimes knowledge, history, and facts are grim things indeed. By being in a community faith, we make the audacious claim that *they alone cannot sustain us*.

We know what life can be like; so did Jesus. That's why we worry. But even in the midst of that worry, there is a treasure given to us, a possibility suggested to us by Jesus and by

countless other prophets and activists and healers: that life *can be* some other way; that the world—and ourselves—*can be* transformed; that we are *not stuck* in the ways of violence and scarcity.

According to this kind of magical thinking, we each have a role to play in bringing about God's kingdom to our little corner of existence.

Imagine that.

Amen.