

Thanksgiving
Joel 2:21-27
Matthew 6:25-33
November 26, 2015

Christine Chakoian
Pastor, First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois
Ecumenical Service at St. James Lutheran Church

Joel 2:21-27

Do not fear, O soil; be glad and rejoice, for the LORD has done great things! Do not fear, you animals of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and vine give their full yield. O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the LORD your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before. The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you.

You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame. You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

Matthew 6:25-33

Jesus said, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 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? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing?"

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you--you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive

first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

I want to start by acknowledging that much of this sermon is borrowed. It is borrowed – with permission – from my identical twin sister, Karen Chakoian, who pastors the First Presbyterian Church in Granville, Ohio. A year ago, her ex-husband died suddenly, leaving her sons without a father. Then, this spring, Karen was diagnosed with throat cancer. For some of the time has been literally voiceless. I share her words to give her voice again.

One of our friends – now a seminary president - tells of a fall day many years ago when he was trying to clear an enormous swath of fallen leaves in his back yard. Ted spent most of the day at it, hoping to have all the leaf bags on the curb out front before the day was done. But then the sun started setting, and he realized it was hopeless. He was a busy pastor with two young kids. And all he could do is worry about when he would ever find the time to get it done.

But that's not what happened.

What happened was this: his daughter Claire ran outside and asked if she could jump into the pile of leaves. So she did. And then he did too. For half an hour they jumped around, father and daughter, playing in the leaves. Then in the twilight, they lay down in the leaves and looked up at the stars. Then Claire suggested a game:

[They] would not say a word until she called “time,” and then [they] would report to one another what [they] saw and heard during... the silence: ... a shooting star,... a dog... in a neighbor's back yard, a twig snapping,... an owl somewhere asking the plaintive question, “Who?”

And instead of worry, Ted was filled with wonder.¹

From worry, to wonder. From anxiety, to awe. Today on Thanksgiving, we're urged to make that journey. The question is: what is the road map? How do we get there? One of the first steps, psychologists tell us, is simply to practice.

The old adage, "count your blessings?" Apparently, it works. In a TED talk on gratitude, psychologist Shawn Achor suggests that writing down 3 new things you're grateful for, for 21 days in a row doesn't just make you feel good; it actually rewires your brain. Instead of scanning for the negative, you start scanning for the positive first.

Achor makes the case that we tend to live our lives backwards. We think that to be happy we should work hard in order to achieve success. That sounds logical, right? But here's the rub: Worrying about the next hurdle may get you over that hurdle in the short run, but then you just start looking for the next hurdle, and the next, and the next, and instead of feeling happier you end up more and more stressed. Ironically, the opposite is true: focusing on happiness first actually leads to more creativity, energy and productivity. It all depends on where your mind is focused, on what you're grateful for, or what you're worried about.²

That's the message of the prophet Joel: Do not fear; be glad and rejoice, for the LORD has done great things! Do not fear, you animals of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and vine give their full yield."

Jesus said it this way: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 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? Consider the lilies of the field,

¹ Theodore J. Wardlaw, Introduction, *Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary*, Fall 2015.

²https://www.ted.com/talks/shawn_achor_the_happy_secret_to_better_work/transcript?language=en

how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.”

Do not fear: the Lord has done great things. Do not worry: your heavenly Father cares for this world, from the birds of the air to the lilies of the field.

Does that mean we shouldn't worry our pretty little heads about the world? Of course not. Our hearts ache for the people in France and Lebanon and Mali and Iraq. Our heads spin for the trauma between police and minorities in Ferguson and Baltimore and here in Chicago. To tell people in the midst of violence not to worry is naïve. To tell parents whose child is suffering from depression not to worry would be dangerous. To tell someone who just received a diagnosis of cancer not to worry is patronizing. There are times and places where worry is appropriate.

But to live that way every day? To be anxious and afraid? That's not the life God intends for us. That's not life in Christ hopes for us.

This is what my sister Karen says about it:

When I first got the diagnosis of cancer last May my first thought wasn't, "Thank you, Jesus." I can't actually tell you my first thought because it's not appropriate for polite company. I thought of my kids, and what they've been through, losing their dad last October. I thought, they cannot be orphaned. They just can't. It turns out I was lucky to have a great prognosis – I am painfully aware that not everyone does with this insidious disease.

Over time I actually became grateful. In September I wrote a "top-ten list of great things about having cancer." Want to hear it? I hope so, because you're about to.

10. Having time to read the paper every morning in bed.

9. Watching TV again for the first time in 20 years – sitcoms and Ohio State football. Yes, I even know the names of J.T. Barrett, Zeke Elliott, Braxton Miller and Joey Bosa.
8. My yard and garden look better than they have in years, thanks to the helpers.
7. Losing 40 pounds without even trying.
6. All the cards, notes, meals and other help.
5. Hearing from people I haven't seen for twenty years.
4. 1-on-1 time with the [friends] who took me to radiation appointments and chemo.
3. 1-on-1 time with each of my brothers and sister who took turns coming to take care of me.
2. No one expected *anything*. Instead, the rest of the staff and church leaders took it all.
1. Learning to expect less of myself, and know that it's OK – not only because there was really nothing I could do, but because at the end of the day, it isn't having everything crossed off my to-do list that matters. It's not my success or hard work or achievements that matter. It's living in the loving arms of God.

That's why I'm grateful I had cancer.

Karen goes on to offer this caveat:

I would never tell someone else with cancer that they should be grateful. Telling anyone else to be grateful is beyond presumptuous; it's cruel. I

think of a family I know who lost their teenage son to suicide – and then two years later, a second son to a heroin overdose. Can you imagine inflicting any expectations on them? There are plenty of burdens people carry that we don't even know. So if you are out there hurting, please do not hear me saying, "You ingrate, you should be grateful." No, you should be comforted.

The truth is, there were times when I was anxious and afraid, especially when the side-effects were hard to handle. I would lie in bed and remember the prayers, all the prayers from people in the church, and friends far away, and it was like a blanket of peace would cover me. I felt the comfort of God's loving arms.

From worry to wonder. From anxiety to awe. Do not fear: the Lord has done great things. Do not worry: your heavenly Father cares for this world, from the birds of the air to the lilies of the field.

Maybe you're not there yet. If so, there is no shame in it. If so, you're not alone in it. But I invite you to take a little step, a baby step, to set the worry down. Let me have Karen give this last encouraging word:

[One of the wisest things I've seen] was in a little article in the *Columbus Dispatch* – which I have time to read every day now, did I mention? It was about a project called the "six-word challenge." [It] challenges to people to sum up their lives in six words. The "Six-Word Memoir" is what he calls it, in a twist on an old challenge to write a six-word story. The memoir challenge has taken off, in schools, in books, and of course, social media.

A [high school] English teacher, Erin Centa, had read about the memoir project and was intrigued. Then they suffered an excruciating loss. Their son, Brandon, was stillborn. Soon she found herself pregnant again, and struggling with the dual feelings of sorrow and gratitude. She used the

six-word exercise to help her deal with the feelings. “Moving forward doesn’t mean moving on” was one.

But the one that really struck me? “Counting the blessings, remembering the pain.”³

Counting the blessings, remembering the pain.

Gratitude doesn’t have to be an either-or proposition. It’s not just happy talk, with all the pain and darkness whitewashed or covered up. That’s not gratitude, that’s denial.

Real gratitude makes room for the pain as well as the blessings. Laughter and tears. Sorrows and joys. God knows that’s the stuff our lives are made of. We don’t worship a savior who gives us happy-talk, we worship the Lord who faced the crucifixion and gave us resurrection.

This Thanksgiving, I hope you’ll make room for that kind of gratitude, the kind that holds the pain and the blessings together.

Together, held in the loving arms of God.

³ Ken Gordon, “Saying it in six,” *The Columbus Dispatch*, Nov. 12, 2015, E1-2.