

Edina Morningside Community Church  
United Church of Christ  
Rev. Howard K. Bell  
Sunday, November 22, 2015  
*Do Not Worry*

The two lectionary texts that I am using today and that were read by Darlene are actually assigned to Thanksgiving Day. I have chosen to use them for Thanksgiving Sunday. The text from the Gospel of Matthew opens with these words: *“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life...”* The Rev. Dr. Janet H. Hunt, suggests the following: *“And so these words which come to us this Thanksgiving aren't first about giving thanks, are they? No, they seem to get at gratitude's opposite --- or at least that which keeps us from being grateful, namely worry...”*<sup>1</sup>

Even though I titled this sermon, *Do Not Worry*, the title came from Jesus' words in this text, not from my lived experience. I tend to be a worrier. My life is full of blessings. Yet I worry. One example is in the composing of the sermons you have heard me preach each Sunday. Even though I preached on a weekly basis when I was in college, I do not consider those sermons to be comparable to my expectations of preaching here with you at Edina Morningside Church. I find myself worrying every week. I worry about assuring that I set aside sufficient time to satisfy my own expectations for sermon preparation. I worry about running out of things to say – although that is probably not based in reality – since I always seem to have lots to say. I worry about my message. Even though my confidence in preaching has increased over our time together, I still find myself spending more time worrying about my sermon than I spend being grateful to God for this wonderful opportunity.

Commentator, Jason Byassee, offers the following: *“The order not to fear (or worry) is perhaps not only the most reiterated in Scripture, but also the least obeyed.”*<sup>2</sup> I believe that it is not possible to receive these words – do not worry – as we might receive a commandment. I do not think of worry as a sin. It can certainly, in extreme cases, evolve into a crippling chronic disease of anxiety. In these instances, professional help must be sought.

But our text is addressing everyday worry. We can certainly understand such everyday worry to be a distraction. It distracts us – as Rev. Hunt suggests – from the experience of gratitude. My worry over sermon preparation distracts me from sleep. It can also distract me from many of the joys of this ministry if I allow it to overwhelm me.

In one of my experiences with a group of people dealing with life-threatening illness, a participant offered the following quote: “Worry is like paying interest on a loan not yet

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<sup>1</sup> [www.dancingwiththeword.com](http://www.dancingwiththeword.com)

<sup>2</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

due." I found this both humorous and insightful. It had added value to me since it actually came as testimony from someone who had much to worry about. Maybe this tells you how my mind works, but this quote has stayed with me for many, many years. I find that recalling it, can, in fact, lessen my worry. I don't like to be stupid. And it appears to be the height of stupidity to pay interest on a loan not yet due!

Jesus directs us to lessen our worry by looking to how God cares for the birds of the air. *"Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet God feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"* (Matthew 6: 26) Jesus then also challenges us in our text with these words: *"And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?"* (Matthew 6:27) Finally, Jesus gives us the guidance to *"strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness"*.

Rev. Hunter guides us further: *"And so these words are ours this Thanksgiving --- urging us to let go of the worry --- and to entrust whatever it is that would rob our lives of peace and joy --- urging us to finally give it all back to God who gives us all of that for which we give thanks in the first place."*<sup>3</sup>

Today's text from I Timothy is not focused on worry. It is focused on prayer. Prayer is often, for me, a way to release my worry, a way to turn over my worry to God – even with my worrying about sermon prep. Our text begins with these instructions from Paul to Timothy: *"First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity."* (I Timothy 2:1-2).

There are, I believe, two core messages that we can derive from this text today. The first core message is that prayer changes lives. Prayer changes the life of the person praying. If you are praying for a person, you cannot hold enmity for them, or at least you are holding open the possibility that reconciliation is possible between you, the person praying, and the person you are praying for. Prayer also contains the possibility of changing the life of the person prayed for. This may be particularly true if the other person is aware of our praying for them, but I certainly hold open the possibility of the person being changed even if they are not aware. This is part of the mystery that God is.

The second core message is that our prayers should be all-inclusive – for everyone – not just those who please us, or who agree with us, or for those who we consider to be most like us. In the text, Paul specifically instructs the Timothy to include everyone in his prayers, even those who were persecuting the early Christians. Now there may be self-interest included in the suggestion that Timothy pray for those in high position, since those in high positions might be less likely to persecute them knowing that they are being prayed for.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.dancingwiththeword.com](http://www.dancingwiththeword.com)

Biblical Commentator, Jane Anne Ferguson, provides us with context of both the time when Paul is writing and today's time. As to Paul's time, she says, "*The Christian community of Timothy's time was persecuted for proclaiming the new revelation of God in Christ Jesus. They were not an accepted part of the social fabric in Gentile or Jewish communities. How much easier it would have been, under the threat of persecution, to withdraw from society to live a "quiet and peaceable" life! Yet they desired the opposite. They wanted to live fully within their world in order to fulfill the proclamation of God's radical desire of salvation for all...*" In regard to today's context, Ferguson says, "*In contrast to our early Christian ancestors, Christians today have been part of the fabric of Western society for centuries. Some have suggested that the majority of American Christians have lived "a quiet and peaceable life" for way too long, and that if we truly wanted to live in "godliness and dignity," we would be turning society upside down with the values of radical love and liberation that Jesus preached, rather than living "peaceably."*"<sup>4</sup>

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, I urge all of us today, to offer supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings for everyone. God's love is offered to us "unearned"; let us offer God's "unearned" love in our prayers and in our actions to everyone even when we disagree with them, when we fear them, or even when they anger us. I urge us to consider ways in which we might even be called to turn our society upside down with the values of love and liberation that Jesus preached and lived out in his life, and in his death. Maybe our prayer to those in high places would do us well if we simply prayed that they might become persons of prayer – inclusive prayer – prayer for everyone.

May all of lives be filled with less worry and more prayer. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).