

Consider the Lilies of the Field  
Matthew 6:25-34  
January 22, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC  
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

I'm so excited about our trip this week! Dave and I are going on a cruise to the Bahamas! I've been packed for many days, and for the last minute things I have many organized lists. You know this about me, right?

The only thing to worry about, realistically, are snow and COVID, and I can't do anything about those, so I don't feel worried about them. But last week I lost a lot of sleep, fizzing over what items were packed in my checked bag vs. my carry-on. I had a dream about it and woke up in a cold sweat, catastrophizing about lost luggage, and feeling a threat to this vacation we have saved for for years.

I actually had to get up in the middle of the night and repack my bags, and by then I was wide awake. I couldn't get back to sleep until 5:00 AM. Useless worry over this simple thing – something that could just as well have been handled in the light of day – interfered with the sleep I needed to be functional and healthy now. It was silly, and I knew it was silly, even as I was repacking everything. But in the middle of the night, I wasn't able to let go of that worry, that sense of threat.

We worry when we feel threatened, whether the threat is real or not, or whether we can name the threat or not.

Do you know what happens to your body when you feel threatened? I'm going to quote from the Mayo Clinic here:

Your adrenal glands ... release a surge of hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol. Adrenaline increases your heart rate, elevates your blood pressure and boosts energy supplies. Cortisol ... increases ... glucose in the bloodstream, enhances your brain's use of glucose, and increases the availability of substances that repair tissues. Cortisol also ... alters immune system responses and suppresses the digestive system, the reproductive system, and growth processes....

The body's stress response system is usually self-limiting. Once a perceived threat has passed, hormone levels return to normal. But when stressors are always present [or when you feel like they are] and you constantly feel under attack, that fight-or-flight reaction stays turned on. [This can lead to a whole host of problems. See if any of these sound familiar to you:] anxiety; depression; digestive problems; headaches; muscle tension and pain; heart disease; heart attack; high blood pressure and stroke; [my favorite:] sleep problems; weight gain; and memory impairment.

Jesus talked about worry as a spiritual problem. In today's beautiful and challenging passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is once again speaking to his first disciples – Simon, Andrew, James, and John. They have left behind their only source of income, their fishing boats, and followed Jesus into an itinerant life that is utterly dependent, a life where they share all they have with one another,

from money to food. Sometimes their needs are met through the hospitality of their friends or family members, but sometimes they are simply dependent on whatever happens next.

These fishermen must have said early on, "Um ... Jesus, it's getting on toward dinner time. We haven't been out catching fish today. Any idea what we will eat tonight?" I imagine that their heart rate increases and their blood sugar levels go a little wonky at the thought of missing a meal.

Or: "Jesus, are we going to sleep rough again tonight? There's a storm coming." With this question, cortisol starts flooding their body again.

Knowing what worry is doing to his friends, Jesus asks, "Which one of you by worrying can add one minute to your lifespan?" He might well say, "Don't you know that worry is actually shortening your life?"

I have told you all before that in my young adult life – long before I met my beloved Dave – I was really poor by first world standards. There was a time when I truly didn't know how I would feed my kids. I worked as hard as I could under challenging circumstances, and it still wasn't enough. \*\*\* I \*\*\* couldn't be enough.

When I hit that wall – that realization – two things happened. First, the difference between wants and needs became instantly clear. Crystal clear. My kids needed

food and shelter and clothing. Everything else was just not on my radar screen. I got my priorities in order.

And second, I just stopped worrying. I didn't decide to stop worrying; it's just that worry left me alone. I prayed. I realized that it was not – it could not be – all up to me. I let God be God. I trusted that God would somehow lead me to whatever resources I truly needed, and they always turned up, just when I needed them most.

Now, I don't wish to go back to that time of my life. I am grateful that I now have all that I could possibly want or need. I know that my life is rich beyond anything I could have imagined all those years ago. I am glad that I can now pay forward the help that I received. But now that I can depend on myself most of the time, I find it easy to worry again.

How about you? How are you sleeping lately? How's your blood sugar? How's your heart?

Jesus knows our worries, and he responds, "You are focusing your attention on all the wrong things. Think about those birds up there in the air. They don't plant seeds or harvest grain, and yet God feeds them. Don't you remember all the times that God has taken care of you? That hasn't changed. Or think about the flowers in your back yard, not the ones you worked so hard to plant, but the ones that grow everywhere of their own accord. They don't work; they just bloom; and yet

Solomon in all his glory was not so beautifully clothed as they are. You are more valuable to God than birds or flowers. So, don't worry about whether you will have what you truly need. Just remember God's providence in your life, and work for God's justice in the world around you. Everything else will fall into place."

A moment ago, we all read from Psalm 46: God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in time of trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea. Though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. The Lord of Hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. The Lord tells us: "Be still and know that I am God." "Be still and know that I am."

Sisters and brothers, we can be at peace. In good times and in challenging times, we will care for one another as God cares for each of us, and we will dwell always in the palm of God's hand.

Thanks be to God!