

Consider the Lilies

The Art and Architecture of Faith, Part 2

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
the Reverend Agnes W. Norfleet

September 16, 2018

Psalm 8

¹O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. ²Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger. ³When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; ⁴what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? ⁵Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. ⁶You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, ⁷all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, ⁸the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. ⁹O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Luke 12:22-34

²²He said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. ²³For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. ²⁴Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!²⁵ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?²⁶ If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? ²⁷Consider the lilies, 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. ²⁸But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! ²⁹And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. ³⁰For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. ³¹Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. ³²“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Truthful proclamation of this beautiful and familiar scripture requires that I begin with a confession... that's right, a confession. I tried to avoid it, tried to come up with some introductory story, some funny little quip about someone else, but the text seems to demand a bit more honesty, not that I think you will be surprised by this, but here it goes: I am a worrier. Now in my defense, worry naturally comes with my roles in life – I am a mother... and a pastor.... and besides, who is not worried these days?

We have spent all of this past week focused on things that would cause us worry. We have watched the massive swirl of Florence barreling down on the Carolinas, and we worry about people we know there, about fellow Americans in harms' way, and about climate change that fuels these growing super-storms. We passed through another 9/11 anniversary, and with the international conflict that continues to simmer and boil, we can't help but wonder if something like it could happen again. America's Catholic leadership has headed to the Vatican to address the insidious and horrendous abuse in the church still reverberating with powerful aftershocks, which rattle not just the catholic community but all religious institutions facing mounting levels of distrust.

If that's not enough to worry about – then the suburbs of Boston exploded in random, gas-fueled house-fires that left once tranquil neighborhoods looking like a war zone. This week saw so much trauma that we barely noticed another mass shooting in California that left six people dead. Then there is ongoing worry about our nation's deep divisions – racial, political, economic divisions, and the inability of our government to unite us rather than further divide us, not to mention, to work for the common good.

Move from the big picture worry to the personal, and it can feel overwhelming: the burdens of grief, concern for families on the brink with their own internal storms of anger and pain and sadness, those we love waiting for a diagnosis, the known illnesses, and fears and troubles, the uncertainty about what tomorrow might bring.

Last Sunday, we considered how, when we walk through the doors of this church we enter God's expansive love story with an almost unnerving

level of hospitality, and God knows when we come we bring a world of worry with us. So just inside the doors of our sanctuary, in the narthex, the stained glass window invites us when we enter this sacred space – not to worry... “*Consider the Lilies*, Jesus says. “*Do not worry about your life...*”

Now, I find myself wanting to argue with this text a little bit... being the worrier that I am. For goodness sake, Jesus, when did you get sandwiched in between the generations of aging parents and the needs of your children? When did you lie awake at night wondering if you passed the exam, or how what the doctor just told you would change the course of your life forever? You tell us not to worry about food and clothing, and most of us don't worry about where our next meal is coming from or having enough clothes, but can't we – with our God-given love for neighbor – worry about your children who are homeless and have neither enough food nor proper clothing... Seems like a little worry might even make us better disciples, but here you are telling us not to worry any more than the flowers and the ravens. Where is the grace and good news for us in what appears to me – at least – to be among your most impossible commands... telling us not to worry?

While I was having this little back and forth with Jesus this week, I did look up the meaning of the word. It helps to know it; it helps to better understand the grace in Jesus' words. “Worry” comes from an ancient word which originally meant to “strangle” or “choke.” It has physical, life threatening connotations in the sense of being seized by the throat. The original Greek word from our gospel also has the deadly notion of extreme anxiety. No wonder Jesus encourages us not to worry; he does not want our lives to be choked with anxiety. ¹

That's why he appeals to the basics, I presume. Life is more than food or clothing, he says. These words were not intended for persons who do not have enough to eat. One cannot simply say to the starving, “Life is more than food.” These words are addressed to people – who have food to eat and

¹ Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreters Bible*, p. 259.

clothes to wear, and yet who spend their lives trying to acquire more. Strive for the Kingdom of God, Jesus says, and what we really need will come.

In the first century, maybe Jesus knew more about what life would be like for us now than I might give him credit for. Notes one biblical scholar in conversation with current medical understanding: “We now know that anxiety itself can be a killer. Stress and worry can cause disease, or contribute to it – which, of course, produces the enchanting prospect of people worrying about worrying, a downward spiral” for sure. ²

So, Jesus goes to the heart of the matter – in order to get his message across – about the coming of God’s kingdom. Reflecting on the birds of the air, and the flowers of the field, Jesus is not simply encouraging a kind of romantic nature-mysticism, but trying to instill faith in God and understanding. Amid all the various storms that life brings, Jesus urges us to trust in God’s sovereignty. As another biblical scholar put it, think about God “sweeping the world with love and power, so that human beings, each made in God’s image and each one loved dearly, may relax in the knowledge that God is in control.” ³

Consider the birds of the air and how God feeds them; of how much more value are you than the birds!? Consider the lilies, how they grow... I care for you as much as I care for them. Do not keep worrying so. Look around you, and everywhere you look, there is wonder and you can see the creative power and the caring providence of God.

In another rapidly changing and perplexing time during the Industrial Revolution and the First World War, the author and poet, D.H. Lawrence, wrote about wonder as an antidote for worry... He was concerned way back then about the toll that industrialization was taking on the human psyche, and that was long before all the distractions of email and Facebook and Instagram

² Culpepper.

³ NT Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, p. 152-3.

and Twitter which have so many of us “on call” – to keep up with the vicissitudes of our time.

A hundred years ago, D.H. Lawrence wrote: “When the wonder has gone out of a man he is dead. When all comes to all, the most precious element in life is wonder. Love is a great emotion and power is power. But both love and power are based on wonder. Plant consciousness, insect consciousness, fish consciousness, animal consciousness, all are related by one permanent element, which we may call the religious element in all life: the sense of wonder.” Lawrence concluded, “That is our sixth sense. And it is the natural religious sense.”⁴ Wonder.

So when you come through the doors of our church there is a stunningly beautiful window that greets us, saying, “Consider the Lilies... consider the birds... of how much more value are you to God than they? And if flowers seem a fragile antidote to your worry, and the birds of the air too elusive, think about this.

A *National Geographic* article entitled, “The Curious History of Feathers,” noted that birds are so commonplace that it is easy to take them for granted. But a fossil found in Germany that is 150 million years old, now shows that a bird’s wing is vastly more sophisticated than just about anything we see. Various birds use feathers to keep cool or warm, to make or muffle noise, to float or snowshoe, to concentrate sound to improve hearing, to build nests, assist digestion, carry water and to escape predators by shedding, the way a lizard sheds its tail. Mere feathers can do all of those things for a bird. “Feathers are the most complex thing that grows out of the skin of any organism,” says Richard Prum of Yale University. “It is astounding how thousands of diverse structures work together to create plumage.”⁵

That is just one part of the birds, the feathers, for which God provides providential care. Jesus says God cares more about us than that. I know – and

⁴ D.H. Lawrence quoted in Martin Marty’s *Context*, 11/1/02, p. 1

⁵ *National Geographic*, February, 2011.

God knows – that when we leave worship we will still be burdened with some of the worries we carried in with us today. But I am also mindful, and grateful that we have a window in our church’s narthex through which light shines, ever to remind us of Jesus’ invitation to wonder.

Do not worry about your life...
consider the birds of the air....
consider the lilies of the field...

They have been given a beautiful job to do – they remind us human creatures that God knows what we need, so we are free to strive for God’s Kingdom, and to rest in God’s wonder.

AMEN.