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Bridge Street United Church

October 13, 2024

Readings: I Timothy 2:1-7; Psalm 126; Matthew 6:25-33

### Why Shouldn't We Worry?

“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” Of course life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. I know that. You know that. But saying that does not help Caroline and me pay the two young men working on a new veranda roof at our house. It does not help me pay for the season tickets for this year's productions of the Belleville Theatre Guild. When I stop on my way home to purchase gas for the car at the Petro-Canada station on Cannifton Road, I will need to pay with cash or agree to a credit card charge before I am able to begin to pump gas. Jesus says, “Do not worry.” But those words do not help Bridge Street United Church to cover my salary, or to pay for the electricity we use here, or to make payments to the city of Belleville for water and sewer. In the days before the direct deposit of my salary into our bank account, I would not have wanted the congregation's Treasurer to say “We don't have any money right now, but remember Jesus said, ‘Do not worry about your life.’”

“Do not worry about your life.” We do not know the precise audience to whom Jesus spoke these words. Given what we do know about the persons who usually gathered around him and who were attentive to his words, it is probably safe to say that they were poor. Many of them were probably people who quite literally did not know from where tomorrow's bread would come. Certainly we know that it was a society in which labourers were paid at the end of each

day, and there was a coin, a denarius, that represented what an average labourer's wage for a day would have been.

Many of us sitting here today do not worry about basic food and clothing in that way. We assume those things will be there, just as we assume the sun will rise tomorrow. There are some here who lack such security. But many of us have it. That said, we do not have to look hard to see a lack of some of the basic resources needed for human life among many people in our own society. We could start with the Drop In that operates from the basement of this church. The use of food banks, not only in large cities like Toronto, but in places the size of Belleville, not to mention a place the size of Tweed, increases every year because many people in low paying jobs, or on some form of social assistance, cannot pay today's increasingly high rents for apartments and still have enough left over for the other necessities of life.

"Do not worry about your life." But there are other worries many of us may have that can be as dominating as the worry that many in Jesus' day had, and some in our day have, about whether they will have food tomorrow. And those other worries are ones that our society encourages. I think first about the physical security of our homes or our persons. When I was driving to and around Toronto while working there a few years ago, and listening to a local Toronto station that had frequent reports on traffic around the city and where there might be problems, I was struck by the number of ads I would hear for home alarm systems. For that matter, a few years ago, Caroline and I would get phone calls with regularity from companies wanting to sell us an alarm system for our home.

Likewise, we are encouraged to worry about our financial security. While we do need to exercise financial responsibility, the efforts to encourage us to focus heavily on investing and making a high rate of return. Many of the ads we see, perhaps especially around February of

each year as we move close to the deadline for making RRSP deposits, seem about more than just about exercising good responsibility to ensure we have sufficient resources for our needs.

So, what did Jesus mean when he said: “Do not worry about your life.” I do not think, for example, that Jesus had in mind the apparently carefree life exhibited by some of the so-called “flower children” of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Some members of that group offered a thoughtful and valid rejection of the excesses of materialism into which Canadian and American society had then slipped. Other members of the group were simply self-indulgent. But if Jesus did not have such self-indulgence in mind, his words clearly did reject a life centred upon the pursuit of material goods. We all know that we ought not to lead such a life, a life where a necessary concern about having sufficient food, adequate shelter, and sufficient clothing make a metamorphosis into a life dominated by a concern about money and material goods.

“Do not worry about your life.” Yet there is a kind of prudent worry that we need to have. In my now long-ago days as a student, I understood I needed to be prepared to write essays and to study for exams. To assume somehow that without study and preparation I would be able to do those things would have been unwise. They were things about which I needed to have enough worry to motivate me to do the necessary work. I need each week to have sufficient concern or worry about being ready for this worship service that I take the necessary time and make the necessary effort to prepare the sermon and the rest of the worship service. I do not think that such necessary preparation, a preparation motivated by the worry of what will happen if one does not prepare, is what Jesus had in mind when he said “Do not worry about your life.”

Similarly, there is another kind of prudent worry we need to have. It is the worry about the consequences of doing risky things, perhaps less of a temptation as we grow older than when we were younger, but the prudent worry about the consequences of driving at too high a rate of

speed, or diving into water at a lake or into a river without having a good idea of the depth of the water into which we are driving.

“Do not worry about your life.” As I said, most of us are not anxious about basic food or clothing. We feel secure—in those respects. But Jesus’s words can have truth for us in other ways. They are less about acquisitiveness in and of itself and more about the lack of trust in God that such acquisitiveness represents. Do we really trust God? Can we live confidently today, or are we always, or even frequently, anxious about tomorrow, so anxious that we are unable to live in the day, enjoy it, and find fulfillment there?

Thomas Long, a now retired professor of worship and preaching at several major American theological schools, points out that when Jesus says “Look at” in relation to the birds of the air, or “consider” in relation to the lilies of the field, these are strong verbs. They don’t mean just a kind of casual glance, but more what we would have in mind if we were to say “You need to really think about” the birds of the air and how they approach life and likewise, “really think about the “lilies of the field” when you are considering how to live your life. What the birds of the air have is a basic trust. When we think of plants, like lilies, Jesus’ point is that the God who “so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven,” values us more than such grass, more than the lilies of the field.

Jesus, in that passage, is encouraging us to have trust in the one who created us, a trust that the one who made us continues to care for us and to love us. Indeed, both this passage from Matthew and the one from Joel are united by a common theme—trust in God. In the reading from Joel, the people have been through very difficult times. They have experienced calamities—both natural and human-made. But in this passage from Joel, the people are assured that the devastation they have endured will be reversed. The beasts of the field, who could find

no pasture, will now find good pastureland, even given the difficulties of the previous years. The people will eat and be satisfied; the threshing floors and the wine vats will be full. The promise is made, despite the apparently opposite evidence, that God can be trusted.

In the reading from Matthew, Jesus was not saying that food and clothing were unnecessary. But he was asking about the importance we attach to such aspects of life itself. “Do not worry about your life” only makes sense “on the premise that God is considered first as the creator of the body and life and second as a gracious creator, faithful” to what God has created [Schweitzer, p. 164]. That statement makes sense only as a call to trust in God. It can make sense to us only when we are able to trust God.

I want to come at this passage from Matthew again from a slightly different angle, but an angle that fits with Jesus’ words “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” What is it that gives our lives meaning, real meaning? I do not think it has anything to do with how much money we may have in the bank, or the model of car we drive, or the type of accommodation we occupy, pleasure though any or all of those things may bring. What I think matters most to any of us is to know at the end of the day that we have mattered—that we have mattered to someone, that what we have done is the best we could do, that we have made a contribution [idea drawn from Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, p. 74, though worked out in my own way in this paragraph]. It is not comparing what we have done with what someone else has done. It is not comparing our contribution to something with someone else’s contribution to the same thing. It is giving our best, that hour, or that day, or that week—to something. That something might be the need to listen as a grandchild talks, or to take out a friend who now spends much of their lives caring for a loved one with dementia, or giving our best in the work

we do, and I could go on. I think what gives our lives meaning is knowing that we have made a difference to someone else, that we have mattered to someone else, that we matter now to someone else. Is not that where living a meaningful life comes, and not in what I might have in the bank?

It is the Thanksgiving weekend. I think we can only be truly thankful when we see life and what we have as gift. Yes, we need to work to enhance our gifts, to develop them such that they can be used at their maximum potential. But in the end, life is a gift. And real thanksgiving depends upon genuinely seeing life as a gift, not making a pretence that it is a gift. I do not thank someone for giving me what I think is rightfully mine, an agreed upon pay cheque, for example. But I do thank the person who gives me a gift, something totally unexpected, something that is truly gift.

This weekend is a time to give thanks, not so much for things we may have as for the gift of life itself, a gift that comes to us from the one who is for us creator and giver. Only when we see life as a gift, given as an act of love and of trust by the God who also shows us love in other ways, only then can we, in turn, live our lives in “fundamental confidence” [Schweizer, p. 167] or trust in the one we call God. And to that God who created us, to the one through whom we have come to know that God most fully, and to the Holy Spirit, the presence of that God with us today and with us always, be all honour, glory, and praise, Amen.

### **Resources**

Long, Thomas G. *Matthew*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1997.

Schweizer, Eduard. *The Good News According to Matthew*. John Knox Press: Atlanta, GA, 1975.