



PRESBYTERIAN HEALTH NETWORK

A Network of the Presbyterian Health, Education & Welfare Association (PHEWA)

## *Consider the Lilies . . . Sample Sermon*



### **“Gratitude”**

This is Christ the King Sunday. It's the last Sunday of the church year. Next week we begin Advent and start the yearly cycle again. And this time as we end our year I wanted to look at Gratitude. Walter Brueggemann once said “During November we reach the conclusion of the church year. We remember our dead and ponder the God of life. We begin Advent and the season of alert waiting for the newness that God will give. Between, in American "civil religion," is Thanksgiving. Perhaps thanksgiving is the right segue from old to new. It's appropriate that the great festival of gratitude should provide the transition from old to new. Gratitude is, in the life of faith, for every season.”

As we turn from this year into the next, we take time to be thankful for what we have been given. Which all follows nicely, but what on earth does gratitude have to do with the gospel passage on worry?

I am a natural worrier. Now, I don't like to brag, but I can go from calm to worry in almost no time at all. I can get worried over just about anything. Or nothing! I worry about things that might happen and things that won't happen and things that shouldn't have ever happened. My worries used to be so bad that I would have trouble functioning around them. I've gotten better over the years, but I still have times when I am consumed by worry.

I worry about getting a chaperone to help lead the mission trip and I worry about getting all the Christmas presents taken care of for the family this year. I worry about sermon writing and holding events where no one has fun. I know these are minor worries to say the least. Just imagine how tied up in knots I would be if I really had something serious to worry about!

Without a doubt, my worries are small. And usually, they are about things I have little, if any, control over. Still, even my small worries get in the way of my living in the moment God has prepared for me. They distract me from doing things I do have control over. Worries keep me from enjoying life.



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So when I read this passage where Jesus admonishes us not to worry about our life. I have trouble. Really Jesus? Just don't worry? How does that help? Doesn't reading these words heap guilt on we who are worried for worrying? You make it sound so easy. Just stop worrying. If I could stop worrying, don't you think I would have done that already? The advice seems overly simple at best, and downright self defeating at worst.

And yet here it is. "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life."

Alright Jesus. How?

Paul Tillich characterized the most predominant modern anxiety as spiritual. We are suffering from emptiness or meaninglessness. We are anxious because we recognize there is something missing in our lives. Now if Tillich is right about that, then perhaps the Jesuit theologian Anthony de Mello, following Jesus' advice, offers the way to stop worrying: "You sanctify whatever you are grateful for." In other words, instead of nursing our worries, let us focus on something else. We have to focus ourselves outside our own minds. Look towards our joys and not our concerns. By focusing on what we are grateful for, we stop worrying.

We focus on our worries, and by so doing, we feed them. We have to deliberately turn away from them and towards something else. Now, I'm not saying this is an easy thing to do. Being thankful isn't something we can just do when we are filled with worry. And a grateful heart doesn't come in a sudden conversion. We find peace by slowly turning away from worry. And we turn when we intentionally stop and find something, anything, for which to thank God. Now, in the midst of worry, it can be really hard to find a way to say thank you.

I think Jesus knew he was asking for no small task, which is why he told us to focus on something small and specific. Birds in the air perhaps? Or, maybe the flowers in the field. What is in your life that you can be grateful for in this moment? It is moving out of your own head and into the rest of the world that will make the difference.

One of the tricks with gratitude when you aren't feeling very thankful is to be specific. Rather than just being thankful that I have clothes and a house and food to eat, it helps to be thankful for a favorite shirt, a comfortable piece of furniture or a well cooked meal. Listing five things to be grateful for every time we start to worry, helps to drive the anxiety away. Taking the time to think specifically about the good in our lives changes our attitude.

As I was working on this sermon, I decided to try to focus on all I had to be grateful for when my worries sprung up again. I always started by thanking God for my dog Dylan, because it's always easy to be grateful for him. Then I would thank God for things like hot showers and comfortable beds and a good cup of tea and indoor plumbing. Before too long, I would forget what I had started to worry about in the first place.



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Studies have shown the amazing power of gratitude. It can drag us away from our own concerns and focus us on things that really matter. It can even make us happier people. Those of us, who tend to focus on what we have to be thankful for, are happier people in general. Jesus wasn't being idealistic; he was being practical. Science has even shown that by not worrying, we can actually add to our life span.

And let's be honest, God has given us so much. Even if it doesn't always seem like it. Just by being born where we were, we are better off than many. If you have food in your refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof over your head and a place to sleep, you are richer than 75% of this world. If you have money in the bank, in your wallet, and spare change in a dish someplace, you are among the top 8% of the world's wealthy. If you have access to clean drinking water, you are better off than 70% of the world.

God has given us so much, and given it in abundance, and yet too often we take all that we have been given for granted.

It's so obvious that we forget to give thanks. Think for a moment of the benefits of being alive here right now: We can laugh and sing and worship together in peace. But it never occurs to us to say thank you, because we are so used to it. Because we expect these things. What benefits go unnoticed because they are too obvious?

I'd like to share with you a story by Mike Minix that I ran across a few years ago. "There was a father and mother, members of a little church, parents of a young man killed in the military. One day they came to the pastor and told him they wanted to give a monetary gift as a memory to their son, who died in battle. The pastor said, "That's a wonderful gesture on your part." He asked if it was okay to tell the congregation and they said that it was. So the next Sunday he told the congregation of the gift given in memory of the dead son.

On the way home from church, another couple were driving down the highway when the father said to his wife, "Why don't we give a gift because of our son?" And his wife said, "But our son didn't die in any conflict! Our son is still alive!" Her husband replied, "That's exactly my point! That's all the more reason we ought to give in thanks to God."

How often do you tell the people in your lives how much you appreciate them? When was the last time you told someone how thankful you are that they are in your life?

By focusing on the good in our lives, we push away worries over things we have absolutely no control over. By focusing on the good, we realize all that we have previously taken for granted. By saying thank you, we remind ourselves that we live in plenty.



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We have so much, and yet we're often deeply unhappy. It always strikes me as strange that the day after we celebrate being thankful for all we have, some of us go to wait in lines for hours in a desperate need to get more, buy more, have more. I don't understand how the two are linked. If we can't be grateful for what we already have, why do we think more stuff will cure the problem? Worry takes away so much of our lives. It damages our health and our quality of life.

We have so much. As we start the new church year, let us take time to acknowledge all that God has done for us and be thankful. Let us realize that getting more will never solve any of our worries. As we turn towards Advent and begin to await our Lord again, let us take the time to say Thank you. Thank you Lord. For everything.

Rev. Cara Milne Gee  
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### **A Story Starter for a Sermon:**

A lecturer, when explaining stress management to an audience, raised a glass of water and asked, "How heavy is this glass of water?" Answers called out ranged from 20g. to 500 g. The lecturer replied, "The absolute weight doesn't matter. It depends on how long you try to hold it.

If I hold it for a minute, that's not a problem.  
If I hold it for an hour, I'll have an ache in my right arm.  
If I hold it for a day, you'll have to call an ambulance.

In each case, it's the same weight, but the longer I hold it, the heavier it becomes." He continued, "And that's the way it is with stress management. If we carry our burdens all the time, sooner or later, as the burden becomes increasingly heavy, we won't be able to carry on." "As with the glass of water, you have to put it down for a while and rest before holding it again. When we're refreshed, we can carry on with the burden. So, before you return home tonight, put the burden of work down. Don't carry it home. You can pick it up tomorrow. Whatever burdens you're carrying now, let them down for a moment if you can. Put down anything that may be a burden to you right now. Don't pick it up again until after you've rested a while."

(Chesterman, Personal communication, 2006). p30 - from *Hawkins, Peter and Shohet, Robin, Supervision in the Helping Professions (2007)*.