

Psalm 84:1-8
Luke 12:22-31
Text: Luke 12:25-27

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333
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Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
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CONSIDER THE LILIES

“And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they never toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory is not arrayed like one of these.” *Luke 22:25-27.*

Anxiety, that relative of fear that invades our lives like a thief in an instant, and it is not cast out simply by being Christian. Anxiety, whose name is legion because it has so many sources. Anxiety that comes upon us in a rush when too many tasks remain undone, or when waves of pain, or loneliness, or the creeping specter of age, opinions, criticism, death or the prospect of dying, our children, their children—rush upon us. Anxiety that broaches the open sides of our own frail lives and robs us of the strength to cope. To paraphrase MacLaren, anxiety does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow, it empties today of its strength.

The gospel offers no single panacea for our deliverance from all anxiety. But it does suggest two related ways of overcoming it. The first, after the influence of Christ, is *prayerful trust*, a willingness to open our hands and release those inner burdens that we sometimes clutch so fiercely. The second, also after the influence of Christ, is to reduce life to its *essentials*. First, prayerful trust.

“Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat.” What would they eat? I was in my first pastorate, fresh out of Princeton Seminary. I must have had the appearance of someone who had just scrambled through years of college and seminary and barely had one plugged nickel left. The congregation discovered that I had not been home to see my family and native England in over eight years during college and seminary, and they decided it was time. They decided on a fund raiser. I distinctly remember Mamie Smith telling me that 100 hens had been donated, plucked, and put up in the church's freezer. “We'll use some of them for the supper,” she said, “enough to feed about 250, and we'll save the rest of the meat for another church supper.” So tickets were printed for the chicken pastry supper and they sold around the community like ice creams in August. It wasn't too long before we were scraping around for unsold tickets. On one occasion I was in the corner drug store and overheard someone say, “Did you hear about the church next door? They've decided to send their minister back to England.” Thankfully, it was a round-trip ticket.

It was 5:15 p.m. on a cold November night, the night of the supper. The rain was coming down in sheets and ticket holders were scurrying into the basement fellowship hall for their take-home suppers. I stood at the door greeting them, near the entrance to the kitchen. Huge pans of chicken and bubbling pastry simmered in the steamy kitchen as a dozen women moved quickly about their polished ritual, filling plates and relaying orders.

The telephone rang and Sue Venters picked it up. Over the clatter of dishes and chatter I heard her say, “I'm sorry, but we don't have a single ticket left. We printed three hundred and fifty and we sold every one of them.” There was a sudden silence as if the last trumpet had sounded, and then in a shrieking chorus the ladies shouted, “Three hundred and fifty! We were told two-fifty!”

Now, as you ladies well know, you don't make chicken pastry or chicken dumpling stew, as some call it, by opening a can. It takes a lot of preparation. Making the dough, rolling it out very thin, then cutting it in long strips then into short pieces; cutting the chicken up into small bites. Suddenly we had 100 people coming that we hadn't prepared for. My face turned as white as the pastry. I headed through the rain to the sanctuary. Alone inside I went up to the chancel steps and prayed with an intensity that I had seldom summoned before. The prospect of 100 people being turned away after buying tickets from a church in good faith was not pleasant. I honestly believed that the prayer of faith was the only thing that would save this situation.

Sometime later I returned to the fellowship hall, but my stomach was still knotted with anxiety and the

site of the line now doubled up and down the length of the room didn't help. Someone shouted, "Hey, preacher, you don't look well. Was it the chicken pastry?"

"Oh, probably some foul thing I ate," I shot back. They all laughed. The ladies in the kitchen were not amused. But I just couldn't seem to let go of the anxiety. So back I went to the sanctuary to pray. Ten minutes later, back through the rain I came to check the line again. "This is ridiculous!" I remember saying to myself. "How can my prayer be a prayer of faith if I still feel this terrible anxiety?" A third time I returned to the sanctuary to pray, less anxious now but still feeling real concern. The line was still about twenty people deep and folks were still scurrying in from the downpour. So back I went a fourth time, determined to stay this time until I felt that deep inner peace which would confirm that I had opened my own hands and honestly released the problem in faith. I would stay until I had that inner conviction that it was no longer my problem, or our problem.

It was about 6:45 p.m. when I returned to the fellowship hall to watch the line. I waited there for a long time. I vividly remember standing by the kitchen door until eventually there were three people left in line. Like a single frame frozen in my memory I still picture the women working at the same furious pace. I still see one plate being passed through the hatch, one more being served a measure of snap beans at the center table, and with her back still towards the hatch, Mamie Smith calling back over her shoulder as she scraped the bottom of the big pot, "I've got enough for one more." She had no idea that's all that was needed to finish the line. Nobody else ever came in. The women in the kitchen that night ate peanut butter sandwiches, but every ticket holder was served.

"Do not seek what you are to eat, nor what you are to drink, nor be of anxious mind," said Jesus. "Seek instead his kingdom . . . Consider the ravens, they neither sow nor reap, nor gather into barns, and yet God feeds them."

"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow." The Greek word here is *krinos*, which is generally translated "lily." It means, in fact, any general flower of the field.

It was late winter or very early spring when these flowers were in bloom. At such a time the fields were awash with natural color. Delicate purple and white wild flowers: narcissus, poppy, and the frail purple day lily, flowed like a sea of shimmering movement and glorious color. Purple was the always resplendent color of royal robes, "Yet even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these," said Jesus, his hand sweeping across an ocean of color on the hillsides. What a marvel of symmetry and compacted beauty they were. Each flower created with a genius and evolutionary patience unmatched by any human art or imagination, and all for the sake of a single, brief day's blooming. No promise of heaven for these fleeting, un-anxious things. How finally inconsequential is a mere flower, which today is alive, and tomorrow—dead and dry after a day's exposure to the sun on the flat roof of a Palestinian house—would be thrown into a round, clay oven where it would dissipate in a flash of fire to charge the oven walls with heat. And then they were gone. How much more, then, will God provide for us, said Jesus? How much more are our essentials in his hands, when we have faith?

Essentials. That's our second point after prayerful trust; the need to reduce anxiety by reducing life to its simplest common denominators.

"Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall put on." We are to recall that the best and most secure life ever lived possessed only a single, borrowed garment. Periodically I drive over to Princeton for meetings or to do some study in the library or catch up on the journals. Close by Speer Library there is a house on Mercer Street that's still clad in familiar white siding. When I was a student, working nights on campus security, three or four times each night, week after week, I would pass that unassuming house on Mercer Street and shine my flashlight on its white clapboard siding.

And each time I'm sure I shrank just a little with awe. I could imagine the ink-stained desk just beyond the front window, a desk once piled high with Journals and papers wrapped in cheap brown string, waiting to be read. Beyond would have been the chalk board on the wall, etched with the flurried notations of a mind that seemed to function on a higher plane, a more elevated level of reason than ordinary mortals. This had been Albert Einstein's home in Princeton, close by the seminary campus. From the back porch, in his day, the occasional sound of a violin, begging for a little vibrato, would waft across the seminary campus.

Einstein was a profoundly simple man. A man whose mind soared free to grasp the extraordinary simplicity of life at its core, in terms of science and the art of living. His was a life as unencumbered as a kite, while we are most of our lives like kites caught up in the branches and the telephone wires.

Once, when a corporation had sent a sizeable consulting fee to Einstein he merely took the check and used it as a bookmark. And then, quite without anxiety, he misplaced the book. Prayerful trust in the Father's providence, and lives that cultivate simplicity. These are the marks of Jesus' own life, and the deposit of his teachings. They are our assurance that anxiety can take a less fearful hold upon us. They are a sign that we have taken God at His word. "Consider the lilies," he said, "how they grow."

Amen.