

“BIRDS, LILIES, AND JOURNEYS OF FAITH”

Romans 5:1-5; Matthew 6:25-34

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Today is Trinity Sunday – a sort of unusual day in the Christian year, in that its focus is on a doctrine. It’s a significant doctrine, even if we do sometimes find it hard to get our minds around it, one that’s been passed on to us by the church over the centuries. But doctrine, even important doctrine, isn’t how the faith is passed on. A living faith is passed on through testimony.

This summer, while Jerry and I are on sabbatical, our worship team has asked those who will be guest preachers each to talk about a scripture that’s been important to them in their faith journey. I don’t know what you’ll hear, what those scriptures may be, or even if you’ll hear some of them more than once. But I can pretty safely predict that you’ll hear something meaningful most every time – because testimony is so powerful, and because every faith journey has its own gifts and wisdom to offer. Each week you’ll have the opportunity to see a scripture through someone else’s eyes. Whenever we hear a testimony to some part of another person’s faith journey, we can find inspiration, see new possibilities, get encouragement for our own journey. Sometimes we feel a connection with our own struggles that makes us feel less alone, or new questions to think about. We see the power of the gospel, the call of Jesus, the Spirit’s gentle guidance. I believe – I hope – you will discover some of that this summer.

You may also – I hope – be nudged to reflect on your own faith journey and how the Bible has accompanied you... and you may start to see how your testimony might encourage someone else on *their* journey.

So this morning I thought I’d kick this off by reflecting on a scripture that’s important to me. And for a preacher to choose *one* meaningful scripture is like asking an artist which is the best color! It was hard! Fortunately for me, it *is* Trinity Sunday, so I can also reflect on one of my favorite doctrines as well as those words I love from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. 😊

This passage from Matthew 6 is important to me for its beautiful reassurance of God’s presence and loving care, but also because I continue to need it so much.

I’m probably not the only person who has read Jesus’ words about not worrying and thought, “easier said than done.” Yes, we acknowledge the absolute truth of what he says: worrying accomplishes nothing. Well-founded fears may help us stay out of danger, sure; anticipating needs and potential problems may motivate us to do things we need to do. But *worry* is a different thing; it just eats up our energy and peace of mind.

Still, we do it. It seems to be human nature. We can’t help ourselves.

We worry about everything from our to-do list to our loved ones' health to whether we have enough money for our needs. About job security, the upcoming doctor's appointment, and whether the family reunion will come off without a major fight. We worry about our elders' needs and our children's future. We worry about whether we'll do a good job or that we'll say the wrong thing or that the decision we just made might be the wrong one. Sometimes we worry that we just aren't ... *enough* in some way. And right now most of us are also worrying about a lot of things going on in the world that have potential to affect our lives – gun violence, climate change, the cost of everything, you name it.

Just saying this makes me feel tired. Imagine what effect the actual day-in, day-out worrying does to us. Worrying, even when our worries are based in reality, opens us to anxiety and to stress.

We see and feel the painful, destructive result: anxiety, stress, and worry have a negative effect on physical and emotional health, on relationships. On whole communities. On our ability to function in our responsibilities and find joy in our lives. This has been painfully evident over these past couple of pandemic years. I have certainly felt it, and I know a lot of you have, too. I hear the voice of Jesus in this scripture as a voice of care and compassion for all of us who have been carrying around burdens of worry and anxiety. Not scolding, just lovingly redirecting us.

Jesus starts out by identifying one of the biggest sources of worry: do I have enough? how do I know when I have enough? how much is enough? just a little bit more? Our culture stokes this kind of worry by encouraging us to root our sense of self-worth and security in our economic status. But it's bigger than that: "which of you by taking thought can add a single hour to your life?" You are not in control of everything. You are not responsible for everything.

Jesus is not, I think, asking us to stop caring, to give up planning or working, to abandon our efforts to take action and effect change. He is suggesting that we need to let go of the expectation that everything or must be is in our control. Our culture today really reinforces that illusion, too, doesn't it? How many ads and inspirational messages give us some version of the message "your destiny is in your hands?" It's no wonder we sometimes feel that something's wrong when we encounter stuff we can't control. It's no wonder that anxiety is rampant.

I don't believe that Jesus is suggesting that our worries are groundless, or not about real things. Jesus whole life demonstrated compassion and respect for the needs and sufferings and struggles of the people he met. What he is doing is inviting us to stop the practice of worrying and start practicing trust instead.

I don't know about you, but I need to hear this again and again. It seems to take time to learn. Years ago when I first started preaching, I'd worry a LOT over every sermon – especially if it got to be about Wednesday or Thursday and I didn't have an idea of what to do. What if nothing at all came to me?? What if it ended up being terrible? Over time, a little at a time, I have come to

trust the process, which is just another way of saying “trust the Spirit.” Something emerges, even if it’s different from what I expected (and it often is!), and even when it’s not the greatest sermon (and it often isn’t), still the Spirit seems to use it somehow, for someone.

That’s been an important learning for me - that God’s Spirit is always at work, particularly in the church, even when we’re not fully aware and sometimes in spite of us. Having trust in that fact is uppermost in my mind, and I hope in yours, as we begin this summer sabbatical time. God is at work in and among us. Let’s try to trust that, and to pay attention and see what it is that God may be doing.

Jesus knows that in order to be able to pay attention to the ways God’s Spirit is working in and with us, we have to get our focus off the worries and anxieties and unrealistic expectations we’re carrying around.

It doesn’t surprise me that Jesus points us to nature, to help us recalibrate our perspective. “Look at the birds. Consider the lilies.” See the beauty. Witness the resilience. Recognize God’s hand, and God’s love for it all. People have long recognized the restorative power of nature – the way interacting with the natural world can provide emotional solace and perspective and a sense of well-being. During the most difficult days of the pandemic, people all over the world rediscovered this; I know that for me it was critical. Being able to go outside, watch birds, pick some flowers from my garden, walk in the woods – those things made a world of difference. This is not something we just imagine: studies show that walking in a forest, for example, lowers blood pressure and heart rate, increases lung capacity, reduces anxiety, improves mental health.

The natural world also reminds us that God is God, and we are not. Its beauty touches us in ways that are beyond words... and reminds us that the Creator cannot be contained in our words, or explanations, or doctrines.

Which brings me back to the Trinity, this doctrine that sometimes ties people in knots, trying to understand it, trying to explain it. God is One AND God is Three? Volumes have been written... and yet nobody understands any better.

For me, the doctrine has gradually come to be less and less about understanding and more about trust. I can’t *explain* it... and that’s part of the point of it: that God is a beautiful mystery, not unknowable exactly, but immense and deep beyond my imagining. And at the same time, God is all about relationship. It’s in God’s very nature to be connected, caring, compassionate. To tend to flowers, and birds, and people like us.

Maybe it’s just me – I’ve not heard of anyone else seeing it this way – but this portion of the Sermon on the Mount seems to reflect the Trinity. It brings me in touch with Jesus words, with God’s creative power, and with the work of the Spirit. It reminds me, just like my favorite doctrine does, that we have a God we can trust, who gives us what we need, and holds us in love, wherever our journey takes us. Amen.