

One More Secret

This morning marks the final week of our worship series, “Telling Secrets.” As Julie and I have repeated from the beginning of this series: we are not mental health experts. We are two pastors who have witnessed up close the ways mental health issues impact beloved children of God and those who love them. Sadly, the church has tended to shy away from discussing these issues, meaning that many of us received the message along the way that—unlike a broken hip or a cancer diagnosis—mental health struggles were shameful and were therefore to be kept quiet. This series is one way we hope to tell the secrets, because once you tell even one person, a secret it is no longer a secret. And in this case telling a secret is a very good and even holy thing. Too many secrets have harmed too many. If even one of God’s beloved children is hurting in body, mind, or spirit, we all hurt, and God hurts, too. And God wants nothing more than for every child of God to be made well.

This morning we turn to the topic of anxiety, a mental health struggle that is often intertwined with others including the ones we have explored, addiction, grief, and depression. According to some who are experts in the field:

Anxiety is the mind and body's reaction to stressful, dangerous, or unfamiliar situations. It's the sense of uneasiness, distress, or dread you feel before a significant event. A certain level of anxiety helps us stay alert and aware, but for those suffering from an anxiety disorder, it feels far from normal - it can be completely debilitating.¹

¹ <https://www.anxiety.org/what-is-anxiety#types-of-anxiety>

When anxiety keeps a person from living the life they are shaped and called to live, God's heart breaks, meaning it's more than ok for our hearts to break, too. [Read Matthew 6: 25-34, CEB]

I am a worrier. I worry about my family, I worry about my health, I worry about finances, I worry about our nation, I worry about children, I worry about the world, I worry about the zinnias in a pot on my back steps that don't seem to be as drought resistant as the tag promised, and I worry about you. So, when Jesus commands his disciples not to worry, I get my defensive hackles up. Really, Jesus? Don't worry, be happy? Is that really what you mean? As my friend and colleague, Kathryn Johnston says:

For anyone who has heard this passage and wondered why they can't possibly 'let go and let God' just like Jesus is telling us to do... I have good news. The disciples didn't do such a good job leaving their worrying behind just because Jesus told them to.²

The disciples keep worrying, and not in secret. They repeatedly worry out loud about things right in front of Jesus. They worry in a boat. They worry on a hillside. They worry while seated at table at the Last Supper. They fret and they fuss. And Jesus sighs. To quote Kathryn once more, "If you ever hear Matthew 6 being used as a finger wagging, whether it be from outside voices or—even worse—the voice in [your] own head, you have my permission to shut that noise down."³ In the end, Jesus is not telling us not to worry as a tsk tsk, finger-wagging, head-shaking moment. Jesus is not trying to shame us out of worrying. No, he is trying to shape a people; he is trying to frame a way of looking at and living in the world. Like manna for the wandering Hebrews in the wilderness, Jesus' words are intended to be a message of encouragement and invitation. Like those who must learn how to live as a freed people who trust God to feed them

² Kathryn Z. Johnston in her sermon on Anxiety for Mechanicsburg (PA) Presbyterian Church in 2019. Kathryn and her colleague, Mark Allio preached a version of this series at the church in 2019.

³ Johnston

enough every day, Jesus' disciples are called to re-learn how to live and even thrive in the midst of an anxious world, a wilderness of its own.

We live in anxious times, too, as did Matthew's community. According to scholars, the one who wrote this gospel around the year 90 CE was speaking to:

[what] appears to have been a firmly established, Greek-speaking, urban and relatively well-to-do community including both Jewish and Gentile residents.⁴

So, Matthew's hearers are thought to be people with some means who have navigated the world of the Roman empire fairly well so far. They have resources. They have some agency and influence. But in choosing to follow Jesus, their lives take a dramatic turn. To follow Jesus, to call him Savior and Lord means choosing sides against the empire. Caesar claims the titles of Savior and Lord for himself. Following Jesus is a traitorous act in the empire's eyes. Choosing Jesus is a risky choice, a choice that is good and hard and holy and faithful and dangerous, all at the same time.

Throughout Matthew's gospel, Jesus preaches about the Kingdom of God, a kingdom that looks entirely unlike the empire in which Matthew's first hearers live. Jesus calls his disciples to live differently, to see the world differently, to care for the least of these, to share with neighbors and strangers, and to trust God above everything and everyone else. The verse that comes just ahead of our passage insists that we cannot serve two masters, that we must choose between serving money and serving God. Yes, Jesus is calling the disciples to love God more than possessions, but I think Jesus' words are about more than simply picking a side. Jesus understands how damaging it is to be pulled in multiple directions, to be tugged apart and torn in two.

⁴ <https://enterthebible.org/courses/matthew/lessons/background-of-matthew>

The Greek word for *anxiety* or *worry* (which shows up six times in this text alone) can literally be translated: “drawn in opposite directions; ‘divided into parts’[or] ‘to go to pieces.’” In other words, to be worried is to be caught in an internal tug-of-war. Jesus does not want his disciples to be torn in two. He does not want us to spend our God-given, valuable gifts of time or energy or creativity fretting over things we cannot control. There is kingdom work to be done, and Jesus wants his disciples to see and embrace the big picture, to take a deep breath and recognize that we are held by a loving God, no matter what. Jesus wants to save us, which means more than giving us some kind of cosmic golden ticket. Salvation stems from the same word that gives us the Hebrew word *shalom*, which speaks of deep peace and wholeness. Salvation means more than a get-out-of-hell-free card. Jesus wants to make us and everyone else whole, and he wants his church to work for everyone’s wholeness, too. He knows full well that the disciples will not suddenly snap out of our anxious ways. And yet he faithfully and repeatedly paints a hopeful picture of how different life can be within the kingdom. Jesus wants us not to worry. He wants us to take that deep breath, to find a dog to pet, to go for a walk, to sip a cup of tea, to look up and out at the flowers and the birds and remember that God is always holding us, cradling us even, along with all of creation. These are good words for those of us who can find a way to press pause and breathe and regain perspective. Then there are those for whom a deep breath is not enough if it is even an option. There are those for whom anxiety becomes too strong, for whom fear about the next minute or the next day or the next decade becomes too powerful. They require more than a deep breath, more than a change of scenery, more than a cup of tea. They are torn apart from within, fractured into too many pieces, and they cannot put themselves back together again all on their own. Jesus knows this. And Jesus knows them, and Jesus loves them, too.

Dr. Lisa Damour is an expert on adolescent mental health whom I deeply admire. Her book about raising girls lived on my bedside table for years. Like Jesus, she points out that distress is part of life.⁵ It always has been. So life is not a matter of “don’t worry, be happy.” Never has been. And for some, worry is a stubbornly constant and oppressive companion. Anxiety disorders spring from any number of causes. Experts contend that there are genetic factors and as well as environmental ones. Young people seem to be more anxious today than in earlier generations. Yes, it may be that we have more tools for diagnosing them than we did in years past. **And** it may also be true that there is more than enough on their plates for them to be anxious about today and tomorrow. There are those for whom the death of a loved one, the pandemic, job loss, climate change, racism, the end of a relationship, academic pressure, abuse, expectations about how perfect their body, their house, their family, or their vacation is (or is not) becomes too much. And they need help. It is ok to need help. There is no shame in being overwhelmed or overmatched. Jesus knows that we are going to worry; he doesn’t want that worry to rule our lives or tear us apart, so he tells us:

Therefore, stop worrying about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself.

Each day has enough trouble of its own.⁶

Each day has enough trouble of its own.

It was true in Jesus’ day; it is true today; it has always been true. Each day brings with it worries both of the small-scale variety and of the overwhelmingly large-scale variety and every variety in between. There’s no shame in worrying. Jesus ultimately wants more for us than our being torn in two or tugged apart with worry. He wants us to be whole. He wants everyone to be whole. And he wants his disciples and all of God’s children to be wholly caught up in Christ’s

⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/lisa.damour/>

⁶ Matthew 6: 34, Common English Bible

coming kingdom, a kingdom marked not by scarcity or fear but by love, hope, joy, justice, and shalom, peace. Following Jesus is not an inoculation against worry. Following Jesus does not mean we will not face distress. Following Jesus means that nothing life throws at us can separate us from him. Following Jesus means that we never have to go it alone. Following Jesus means that worry will never have the last word, nor will addiction, nor grief, nor depression, nor anything else in all creation. Not one of us is too broken; not one of us is too battered. God treasures every single one of our siblings and every single one of us even more than my droopy zinnias, more than the soaring birds, more than the gilded lilies. We are forever loved, forever cherished, forever worthy of being made whole, because above all else, we are his, always.

Thanks be to God. Amen.