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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Luke 12:32-40, Lectionary 19
Do Not Be Anxious

[Jesus] said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you. (Luke 12:22-31 ESV)

What do you think when you hear the words, “Do not worry about your life”? There are different ways of hearing these words. One is simply to not hear, that is, to brush biblical texts aside. That is one of the factors that stand in the way of our hearing. Jesus said at various times, “If you have ears to hear, hear.” Now think of it, someone close to you might have said during a discussion about something important, “I don’t think you are listening,” when it comes to the Word, there are things we need to know. Our message today is how excessive worry can get in the way of faithful hearing.

Today’s lesson is from the twelfth chapter of Luke. In it Jesus is teaching about our felt needs for security and our relationship with money. I want to go back a few chapters where he spoke of the same thing. In chapter eight we hear,

“A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold.’ As he said these things, he called out, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear.’ When his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that ‘seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.’ Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word,

receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. *And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.* As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience. (Luke 8:4-15 ESV)

Worry is part of the human condition. Why? Because we live such a precarious existence? No, because sin is part of the very fabric of humanity. To think of living a sinless life is nonsensical. You would not be human. There has been only one person who lived a sinless life because while he was fully human, he was also fully divine. From at least the time of Augustine the Latin speaking Western church has viewed sin differently than in the East, where they spoke of the human soul as something tarnished, such that with a good rubbing from a soft cloth one could get the soul clean and perhaps really shine. That is not what we are taught, and it is not what my experience bears out. Nowadays, it has become very unfashionable to speak of sin, we live in an age of supposed tolerance, and I don't know if the forbiddenness of mentioning sin is ironic or just perfectly understandable, because there seems to be just so much of it these days.

But let me warn you. If people think about sin, they are probably thinking of sins, plural. And it is probably other people's sins. And it is probably the most obvious ones. But the church talks about the need for a Savior not because of a lot of sins; we need salvation from sin itself. Sin, the thing that leads to sins. Sin manifests itself in many different sins. And today I am bringing up something you may or may not have thought much about, the sin of excessive worry.

Whether we are prone to excessive worry, or it is just that we might be going through a rough patch, excessive worry is a sin. Proof enough is to try to not worry. One cannot merely wish it away. It's like fear. We can tell ourselves not to be afraid but something actually needs to change. And this is because of sin. We cannot wish sin away. Something has to address it.

Saint Paul perhaps described the human sin situation best,

“For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be

to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.” (Romans 7:14-25 ESV)

So I asked earlier if you heard the words “Do not worry”. I want you to think about how you heard. In his parable Jesus said that the Word is like a seed and it needs to make it into the heart and sprout and grow, but there are several simple ways the Word does not make it there. The devil can come and snatch it away. God knows there are many diversions to us hearing the Word of God today. One is that the person hearing is not serious. But it is the third example in the parable that would affect most people listening to a sermon in church, in other words. You. “And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it.” Jesus explains “*And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.*” So, of course, a love of pleasures and wealth is anti-thetical to the Kingdom of God, but for most of us the greater danger is, as we say “the cares of this world”, our preoccupations, which includes our worries.

So this has direct bearing to “Do not worry about your life.” And so, we let us seek to understand this completely and see if there is a solution. That is, how can we not worry? I have worry. I have good reasons to worry, I think. I have concerns about my family, concerns about my career, my work includes problems and situations that are not easy to solve. As I hold this question about worry up to the light and look at it, I find I can even worry about worry. I begin to see I need to look at this question as one of trust. Why do I not trust what Jesus is saying? Realizing that this has something very much to do with faith, yes, faith in God means trust in God, and I realize I at times lack this faith. And then I cry out to the only one who can give the help I need, and knowing that this lack of faith is due to sin, I confess my sin. Remember, as in the case of being afraid, something has to change in order for fear to go away. So I ask my Lord to forgive me of excessive worry, and in faith the Holy Spirit leads me to ask for a way forward, and I ask for help, and I and if you are able to follow this I think you understand this too, we know that this is actually a familiar path, yes, this is actually the daily dying that Luther spoke of, that I, we, must die daily, our old self must be put to death, and I remember that I am a baptized Christian. Not a perfect person, a baptized person. My life is hidden with Christ, and I live with Him, He in me, and we will live with Him forever. There is nothing the world can throw at me that will change this. So this is the way to actually hear “Do not be anxious,” we hear this as comforting words from the Savior. A person may not even take notice of a biblical text, they may bat it away, thinking it of no consequence, but then when they are directly confronted they feel the harshness of the words, the impossibility of being completely obedient. But on admitting and confessing, and thinking to oneself as Paul did, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” We come to “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Then we see these words not as irrelevant, not as impossible, but as reassuring words of promise, that is, what is possible when one turns everything over to God.

We find our closing in the words of the Parable of the Sower, some seed finds its way to good and honest hearts and bears fruit with patience. Only God himself can make our hearts good and honest, so may this be another comforting gospel promise. We can turn our hearts, our anxieties and all our other burdens, and God will make our mind, heart, and soul what they will be for him.