
Do Not Be Afraid, Little Flock

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
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“Do not be afraid.” This runs like a refrain through the Bible. “Do not fear. Do not worry,” Jesus says over and over, especially in this section of Luke. “Do not worry about your life,” he says, right after the parable we heard last week. You remember that parable, right? And Canon Mitchener’s fine sermon on it? It was the parable about the rich farmer who responds to his abundant harvest by planning to build more barns, to save it for himself... only to hear that that night, his life, his soul, will be demanded of him. “Don’t worry about your life,” Jesus says as commentary on that parable, “about what you will eat or wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens, the lilies, the grass of the field—how God clothes, feeds, and values them. How much more must God value, and provide for, you? So don’t worry about these things, for your Father knows you need them. Instead, strive for the kingdom of God, and these things will be given to you.”

Guess what Jesus says next? Here’s a hint: it is the beginning of today’s Gospel. That’s right! “Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid, little flock, for it’s your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

OK, ok, Jesus. Enough already! We get it! Or do we?

Did anyone fly this summer? Then you likely witnessed this strange yet time-honored ritual at the gate: all these people with boarding passes in hand, that is, with *guaranteed* seats on the *same* airplane—crowding around the boarding area, staking out a place in line, and shooting the evil eye at anyone who even *thinks* about breaking... as if the assigned seats were going to run out. As if those who got on the plane last would arrive at the destination last, or incur some other disadvantage.

Or remember the pandemic runs on toilet paper, hand sanitizer, disinfectants, and so many other things? There was plenty available, until people decided there wasn’t, and rushed to get what they could, *all* that they could, thus creating the scarcity they feared, with some of us having enough toilet paper to last a year—and others having to, well, innovate.

We recognize these behaviors, don’t we? And we recognize the beliefs that underlie them: There isn’t enough. You always need more, more than you have: more money, time, knowledge, recognition talent or time or turf. If you don’t get it, someone else will. And when you *do* get it, that ever elusive *more*, so the reasoning goes, *then* you’ll rest. *Then* you’ll enjoy and share what you have. *Then* you will be free.

These are the “myths of scarcity.” That’s what hunger activist Lynne Twist calls them in her book, *The Soul of Money*. The lies of scarcity say that there is not enough. More is better, necessary even. And there will always be winners and losers. There will always be poverty and hunger and inequity. These are the ways of the world, and we have no choice. That’s just the way it is. [\[1\]](#)

And what do these assumptions and behaviors do? As we have seen, they create the very scarcity and inequity that we fear! But that’s not all. They diminish what we *do* have: the resources, relationships, blessings, ideas, time. They distract us from the beauty of the earth, of this moment, of the people who are here, now. They distract and distance us from our true values and true selves.

The fear of scarcity, or the imagined or real lack--of money or power or toilet paper and other necessities—can become a justification for greed, inaction, prejudice, inequity. For dishonesty, exploitation, envy. It can become an excuse for diminishing others to build ourselves up. Hoarding our treasure. Working when we really want to

rest, or to do the things or be with the people who really matter to us.

This is not who we want to be. It's not who we are. And it is exhausting.

So Jesus offers another way. "Do not fear. Do not worry. Sell your possessions, give alms, make purses that don't wear out." Loosen your grip on the things that bind you.

At first, this may sound like more of the same: one *more* thing you need to do or to get right: "Stop worrying! Conquer your fear!" And when you've done that, there's *more*, again: "Sell your possessions, give alms, learn how to sew and make a purse!" If you're worried already, this is likely to make you worry even more.

In fact, this is a good time to share a nugget of hard-earned wisdom: telling a distressed person (or spouse!) to calm down, or a scared person to stop being afraid, often only exacerbates their distress or fear and leaves them feeling more alone and helpless and misunderstood. And irritated with you.

That is not what Jesus is doing here! Jesus is telling the truth: There is enough. You are enough. You are valued, precious. And God's got you. Jesus does not diminish or ignore our needs and worries, but knows them and names them. Yes, you need clothing, housing, food, and drink. Physical safety, healing, purpose. You need to pass the class, pay the bills. You need to care for your children or parents. God *knows!*

God knows. God knows what you need, what you fear, what keeps you up at night. God knows *you*. And it is God's *good pleasure* to give you what you really need. It is God's delight to give you the kingdom! The true kingdom, where there is true freedom, true abundance. For everyone. Today.

It's worth pausing here to note a concern raised by some environmentalists and economic philosophers about the notion of "abundance."^[i] To some, they argue, it has implied that our resources are inexhaustible and has led to carelessness about them. It has justified the unquestioned drive for *more*, for endless growth or expansion—expansion of territory, population, productivity, profit, business. Or in the church, more people in the pews, higher numbers, more programs. Because of this, they suggest that "sufficiency" is a more helpful and accurate term.

After all, "sufficiency" is what we see in nature, isn't it? That may be why Jesus points us to birds and grass and sheep and trees. They take what they need and no more. They grow to the right size and then stop. In sufficiency, "there is enough, *and* it is finite," says Twist.^[ii] And this finitude is not a threat! On the contrary, it makes what is there even more precious, and what we do with it—how we steward it—even more important. It creates a more accurate, more mindful relationship with what *is*.

Though nature is a good teacher, Jesus isn't just talking about nature, which is impersonal. He is talking about God our *Father*: our good and generous God, who sees, loves, cares and provides for each and every one of us, personally *and* infinitely! In *abundance!* The abundance, the freedom, the meaning we seek, they are here already, in God. There is abundance in God! We know that abundance not in material prosperity, or in the amount of anything in particular, but as we experience and receive God's kingdom. As we dwell in God's sufficient *and* abundant goodness and love, and proclaim it with our lives.

That is the truth. That is the promise of Jesus. And it changes everything. It releases us from fear to trust, hope, gratitude, and joy. It frees us to invest in what really matters, and to offer what we can, and who we are, already. It frees us to celebrate and be generous with what *is*, and to make a difference with what we have, today.

[i] Lynne Twist, *The Soul of Money* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), 43, 49 – 55.

[ii] See, for example, Donella Meadows' *The Limits of Growth* (initially published 1972).

[iii] Twist, 86.