



“An Antidote to Anxiety”

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Luke 12: 32–40 (NRSV)***

What keeps you up at night?

- a) Financial concerns—making rent, paying off the mortgage, saving for college, funding your retirement, or paying for nursing home care?
- b) Family problems—your marriage, your kids, your parents, or your grandkids?
- c) Your job—the jobless recovery, too much to do for too little money, or a bad fit?
- d) Health issues—a scary doctor’s report, a creeping mental health challenge, or some spiritual malaise?
- e) The state of world affairs—the price of corn in Mexico, the future of the Euro, or the War in Afghanistan?
- f) All of the above?

I suspect that at one time or another most of us have lain awake worrying about all of these concerns.

No doubt, most of us have lived with financial concerns. I remember quite clearly the tyranny of living paycheck to paycheck, especially as a younger adult, trying to meet rent, buy groceries, and keep enough gas in the car to get to work and back.

On the subject of family problems, I remember my friend Shirley saying, “The Lord gives us children to keep us on our knees.”

I also remember a former parishioner who had three adult daughters, and who once thought that her worries would be over when the girls had graduated high school. But then she discovered that her worries tripled after her children fledged, because their problems could no longer be solved with band-aids, a hug and a kiss, or a “time out” in their rooms.

Family problems test every generation. For example, I have listened to numerous children of aging adults who have been pressed—as the result of an emergency—to explore health care options for their parents when suddenly it was unsafe for them to stay alone in their homes.

Speaking of health challenges, most of us, at one time or another, have or will face some life changing or life-threatening illness. While for others the challenge may have more to do with a mental or behavioral health problem like depression or addiction, or someone else’s unwillingness or inability to recognize their particular problem and seek help. Depending on the situation, we may face surgery, or be required to change our lifestyle in order to get well, or both.

I suspect that if we think about the whole of our lives, we realize that *what* we worry about and *how much* we worry about certain things has changed over time, and is somewhat dependent upon our circumstances and our particular perspectives on our circumstances.

For example, I am blessed that I don't have to worry about how to meet expenses for the bare necessities anymore, but I do worry about other financial concerns now that rarely crossed my mind as a younger person, such as wondering whether there will be enough resources to care for our parents in their old age, and how much we need to save for our own retirement.

Social location also influences how and what we worry about financially. For example, whether and how much we worry about the price of corn in Mexico likely varies depending on whether we are trying to develop clean energy and new jobs at an ethanol plant in Iowa, or trying to buy corn meal to make tortillas for our children in Michoacán.

Concerns about the War in Afghanistan likely vary depending on whether we teach high school social studies, know missionaries in Southern Asia, or have a family member on active duty in Kandahar.

How we view this jobless economic recovery that we're in varies too, depending on whether we are among the 12.5% of Californians who are unemployed, or one of the masses who kept our job, but finds our work more arduous as we're expected to do more with less, and are afraid to look for other employment, because nobody is hiring.

Indeed, what keeps us awake at night varies depending on our life stage, and our social location; but to worry seems to be an inherent part of the human condition.

II

Today's gospel reading provides further evidence of the scope and the timelessness of human worries. Jesus didn't waste his time teaching and preaching about issues that were not problematic. So the fact that Luke includes Jesus' instruction about material and spiritual concerns is evidence that these concerns were of equal or greater concern in his day as they are now.

Consider, for example, that more than 90% of the population in first-century Palestine was comprised of peasants. Jesus' followers included a lot of marginalized people, which in that time were foreigners, widows, orphans, and persons suffering from physical or mental illnesses—conditions that contributed to these person's poverty and exclusion from the rest of society.

Consider, too, that families were configured differently in ancient times compared with today. Marriage in the first century (as in most of human history and in most cultures) was primarily an economic institution. People did not marry for love. They married for economic and social stability. Also, polygamy was common, particularly among men of means. So, if one sought emotional intimacy one invested in ones relationships with ones parents and children, rather than a spousal relationship.

Work was also difficult for most people in those days. The basic tasks associated with feeding, clothing, and housing a family absorbed most of one's day. Work that was done to earn income to obtain things one couldn't raise or make took the rest of a person's waking hours.

Disease was rampant. Cures were hard to come by. And death at an early age was a fact of life. In Jesus' day, for example, adults rarely lived past the age of 40, and men who didn't die in battle tended to outlive women, because childbirth was so risky in those days.

To compound these genuine earthly worries, in Jesus' day there were numerous crackpots running around the Mediterranean region preaching hell, fire, and damnation and proclaiming an imminent Armageddon. In sum, Jesus' followers had a lot to worry about.

III

Then, here comes Jesus, offering these words of comfort and assurance in Luke 12:32, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is God's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

Translated, this passage means that Jesus invited his followers to stop worrying about the end time, because God has already provided for our eternal salvation. So we should just chill and focus on trying to experience the more abundant life that God has in store for us on this side of heaven.

Sounds fabulous, doesn't it? How do we do that? How do we experience God's kingdom right here on earth, right now?

"Easy," Jesus says. "Sell your possessions, and give alms [to the poor]. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Now you're wondering, "Was he serious? Furthermore, am I serious? Are they advocating that I/we give up everything for Jesus?"

Answer: Yes, but not in the way you think.

I think that Jesus' challenge to sell everything and give to those in need was one of his ways of reminding his followers that there truly was and is enough material wealth to address human need, the problem is distribution.¹

I also think that he challenged the disciples to sell everything and give to those in need as a way of jolting them (and ultimately us) into a period of earnest values clarification.

Regarding the issue of distribution, Bread for the World (an international aid organization founded on the heels of WWII) has said for decades that there is enough food in the world to feed every person who is hungry. The reason that much of the world goes hungry is that the people who need it don't have it and that the people who have it haven't yet shared it.

Regarding Jesus' values clarification challenge, ask yourself, for example, "If I gave up everything, what would I miss most?"

Another way of getting at this values clarification question is to create a 12-month report of your family's personal finances, and note how the expenses shake out. What are the five things that you spend the most money on as a family? What are the five things that you spend the least on? Do you like what you see? Do your espoused values match the results you see on the page?

How you and I answer these questions about what material things we would miss most, or what we spend the most or least of our money on is—whether we like it or not—our answer to Jesus' question, "Where is your treasure?"

IV

Another aspect of what we treasure is how we spend our time.

¹ Remember, too, that the author of Luke was also the author of Acts, and the way that Luke remembers things, the first followers of Jesus converted their individual property to communal property. They gave up their conventional lifestyles, but they did not become destitute. Instead, they shared what they had with others, and each person drew upon the common purse as they had need, as Luke described in Acts 2: 44–45, "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need."

Jesus' declaration to "keep your lamps trimmed and burning" is a reminder that time is a crucial commodity, and that what we do with it matters to God.

So, another way to assess our values and determine whether our espoused values align with our behavior has to do with how we spend our time. Time is a huge asset and one common to all of us, regardless of whether we are currently earning cash income.

Unless you're a lawyer or work for a company that bills clients on an hourly basis, you probably don't record your time in 15-minute increments. But we could all get out a calendar, reflect back over the week, and make some estimate on an hourly basis of how we spent the past week or two of our lives.

Again, do we like what we see after completing our assessment? Do our espoused values align with our behavior? If not, what adjustments do we need to make in the coming weeks? When will we stop, reassess, and determine if we are making progress toward the values and behavior congruity that we say we seek in our lives?

V

Paying attention to what we claim to value, and bringing our financial and human resources more closely into alignment, can help reduce the amount of anxiety that we experience in our lives. But to achieve the kind of inner peace and balance that Jesus demonstrated, that his followers hoped to emulate, and that we would like to arrive at for ourselves, we need a more robust, holistic approach to dealing with our anxiety.

While I don't claim to have a one-size-fits-all solution to anyone's anxiety, I have learned the wisdom of a holistic approach to healing in general, whether we're talking emotional or spiritual anxiety or some other malady.

A wise friend and colleague of mine named Cheryl, who is a clinical psychologist in Boston and a former United Methodist pastor, once explained to me that she never accepted clients who were unwilling to take a holistic approach to their health, meaning that her clients needed to commit to a healthy diet, exercising two to three times a week, taking prescription medication if recommended by a physician, and developing and maintaining a spiritual practice two to three times weekly—in addition to talk therapy. I've never forgotten her position, and I have frequently suggested similar approaches to parishioners over the years.

In closing, let me say I don't think that worry ever goes away completely for most rational adults. I think that worry is part of the human condition. I do, however, think that there are better and worse ways of managing anxiety, that better management starts with an honest assessment of our values, including how we spend our time and money, and that a holistic approach to healthy anxiety management is needed in order for us to achieve the kind of balance that we need to successfully negotiate the real-life challenges that are part of normal daily living and the unfortunate woes that beat impartially at each of our doors.

I also think that Jesus was as adamant about us sharing our worries with each other as he was about us sharing our bread with anyone who had need. In our modern twenty-first century time, this sharing of cares and woes may be as much a counterculture thing as sharing our material wealth—but no less important to our spiritual health and growth.

Jesus' teaching about anxiety is as much about reminding his followers that we are called to be a resource to each other for addressing values clarification and helping to hold each other's worries, as we are called to help meet the material needs of each other; so that through life in our faith community we might discover—if not solutions to life's biggest problems—at least some ways to hold and handle the challenges that we are dealing with on this side of heaven.

This is the good news of the gospel. Thanks be to God. Amen.