

## *Consider this...*

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Matthew 6:25-34 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Our scripture reading today comes from the Gospel of Matthew, the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter. It's part of that long section in Matthew we know as the Sermon on the Mount, and like last week, is a familiar passage of scripture.

This teaching comes after Jesus has addressed a number of human experiences – prayer, charitable giving, divorce, anger, adultery, love of enemy and love of money. And then he tells us not to worry!

<sup>25</sup> “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink,<sup>[a]</sup> or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? <sup>26</sup> Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Parent feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? <sup>27</sup> And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>28</sup> And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, <sup>29</sup> yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. <sup>30</sup> But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? <sup>31</sup> Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ <sup>32</sup> For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed God knows that you need all these things. <sup>33</sup> But strive first for the kingdom of God<sup>[c]</sup> and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

<sup>34</sup> “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

Sometimes worry stalks me at night and keeps me awake. One of my childhood memories is of my mother stroking my hair and calming my worry late at night before a math test. I know that I am not alone as a worrier! Jesus' words offer us comfort, challenge and can be a mirror into our souls.

It helps to understand that Jesus is not against working hard to provide for one's family or planning for the future, but rather, that anxious worry about past and future can rob us of joy in the present. Excessive worry paralyzes us – unable to move forward or back, we become stuck. It prevents us from seeing creative solutions to the work we're called to do. And worry isn't just useless and distracting, it's detrimental to our health – think about stress headaches, exhaustion, ulcers and the like.

Jesus paints a picture here – poetically – of the provision of God for nature and God's creatures, including us. Birds, flowers, and animals live out their purpose without care. Jesus knows that we are not grass, flowers and birds – we have cares, but nature is a teacher. Consider, ponder, wonder, he says, take a moment to breathe and drink in God's creation. Turn away from your own perspective and look around the way God does.

Gaze at the birds—who among us hasn't felt just a bit of awe upon seeing a bright crimson cardinal on a bare branch in winter? Or felt just a bit lighter when spying the first purple crocus of spring?

Even the grasses that bloom for only a day are painted white, yellow, and green. Routinely, these were plucked up and used to stoke the clay ovens in Palestine in order to get them really hot. Fleeting beauty.

I sure wish I could offer us a three- step plan to reduce worry and anxiety in one week. Rather, Jesus' teaching can remind us, when we are mired in worry, to take a deep breath and lower our shoulders from our ears. They invite us to listen to the world that cracks, buzzes, and moans in winter, and to consider the grays and browns of February that hold their own austere beauty. Considering the natural world gives us a

mini-respite from our striving and anxiousness, and can help reorient our work, service and advocacy.

I am a lover of poetry and feel that it is necessary to our spirits. Poetry helps us pay attention – it is an offering much like a gift. With rhythm, sound, cadence, and imagery washing over us, it invites us to step into a different place –a different feeling - if only for a moment.

The late poet and essayist Mary Oliver made paying attention her life's work. Her vocation was careful observation of the birds, ponds, flowers, sun, insects, fields, woods, and then writing about it. Her work was intensely spiritual and touched souls deeply and she will be missed. Inspired by Ms. Oliver and the poetry of Matthew, we've included a lot of poetry in the service today.

The journey of life and faith is one of self-discovery -- reading and listening to poems can help us understand our God-given place in what Mary Oliver calls the “family of things.” It is a gift to be aware and consider one's thoughts, feelings and actions early in life in order to help define who you apart from the way the world wants to make you.

Today, instead of considering the lilies of the field, we'll consider the Lily of the Oak Grove. She is one of our amazing youth, the youth that many of you have told me you want to get to know.

I read something she posted on Instagram that so moved me I asked her to share it with you. When I read Lily's words, I was reminded of The Summer Day, arguably one of Oliver's most beloved poems.

I think these verses stand in conversation with Jesus' words in the gospel and lead into Lily's statement.

## The Summer Day by Mary Oliver

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean--  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down--  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
With your one wild and precious life?

*Lily speaks...*