

“Don’t Worry! God Provides”
Rev. Jayneann McIntosh, Lead Pastor
First United Methodist Church of Wausau
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Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 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? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew 6:25-33

In 1635, Rodger Williams was expelled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for spreading "new and dangerous ideas." Williams was a Puritan who – unlike other Puritans – promoted religious tolerance and pressed for separation of church and state. To escape prison, Williams made his way south, purchased some land and established a settlement he named Providence – in gratitude, he wrote, "for God's merciful providence to me in my distress."

The word *providence* isn't used much these days, but maybe it should be. With the same root as *provide*, it means God provides. Or, being in God's protective care. This is Jesus' topic today.

Everything that happens, clear or confusing, is subject to God's purposes. Subject because while God does not plan or will everything that happens, God will shape all that happens – the wonderful or the terrible – to God's intention. All the sorrows, the joys and the messes of this life, God can turn to good. Some people are quicker to attribute what happens to fate or luck. But providence says this is God's world and neither superstition nor fate dictates what happens. It also means that no matter what terrible things may happen to us, they cannot separate us from the love of God. God can find creating, saving possibilities – that cannot be destroyed – in every situation.

Luck can't do that. God's providence rejects the idea that good only comes to a handful of people. God's caring is for everyone. Providence also rejects the notion of fate. When Lt. Commander Raymond A. McCool's wife suffered injury and he was excused from service temporarily so that he could care for her. When the submarine *Thresher* subsequently went down with all hands, it wasn't because of fateⁱ. It's not that "It wasn't his time." God doesn't work this way.

Providence also challenges superstition. In a world of mysteries, our not understanding them

doesn't mean they're beyond God. Speaking of things that are going well doesn't bring bad luck. (Knock on wood.) What we can count on is God's providence. Jesus reminds us of God's ongoing caring as he challenges the depth of our faith.

Jesus knows his audience. In the first century Ancient Middle East, obtaining the basic necessities was a challenge for many. Jesus focuses people's attention on everyday things – birds and grass, what we wear and eat – to talk about ultimate questions, like: Is our allegiance solely to God or is it divided?

True discipleship involves unswerving devotion to God. It's not a special calling for an elite group (like pastors or onehanded jugglers). We are all called to be saints, everyone who desires to follow Christ. We each need to practice a life devoted to God.

Jesus' words seem foreign today. We know of the poverty that plagues our world and yet we're encouraged to be discontent with what we have. We're confused, our loyalties divided. Jesus' message is timely and important precisely because of this.

Worry erodes our trust in God. We end up feeling that it's all on us. Or, worse, that we have to compete rather than share in abundant life. There's a difference between concern and worry. *Concern* is when you reasonably wonder about a situation and what you can do about it. *Worry* is being overly concerned, beyond anything you can do about it. Worry comes from an Anglo-Saxon word that means to choke or strangle. That's pretty accurate. Worry won't stretch your finances or keep dementia at bay. But it will lower your immunity, cause you to lose sleep, and a host of other things. It also messes with your relationship with God.

Fog can blanket seven city blocks to a depth of 100 feet. But if we could change that fog into water, it wouldn't even fill up a water glass.ⁱⁱ Worry is like that fog, blinding us to God's providence.

“Study the birds ...” Jesus says. They do what's natural yet God looks after them. Our lives are similarly under the watchful attention of this caring parent who knows our needs. Did God take care of you yesterday? The day before? Then, why're you worried today?

Some people believe God will get them to heaven but don't trust God to get them through the next twenty-four hours. If my kids had worried about whether or not I'd feed, I'd have felt pretty bad. Jesus suggests that when we worry, it's like we're not confident that God is a caring, providing God. If you believe in a creating God, work at believing in a sustaining God. As we grow to trust God more, we gradually move from a scarcity to abundance mindset.

There was a man who worried that he'd get cancer. There was a family history of the disease. He worried about it thirty years, then suddenly died of a heart attack. Should you be concerned about your health? Certainly. Should you do what you can to stay healthy? Of course. But after that, let it go.

Not worrying doesn't mean not planning. Jesus isn't saying we should abandon our lives or empty our savings. Through the centuries, some people have mistakenly believed Jesus is against career advancement, financial planning, and life insurance. Not so!

He knows God expects us to use our gifts and skills, and to prepare for the future. But we shouldn't be overly concerned. You don't let your children play in traffic. You do save money for emergencies. You do ask the doctor to check lumps. Reasonable concern. What Jesus is saying is that worry – beyond reasonable concern - indicates a life separated from God. None may

worry about their life, their possessions and social status. They don't know God as a loving parent. They believe their future is in their own hands or the hands of fate.

Following Christ means seeking God's agendas. Faith is trusting that God has ultimate concern for us and for all of creation. This kind of faith grows only in the context of a close relationship with God.

Jesus doesn't condemn us for recognizing our needs. But he does call us to depend on God. We have enough to worry about today without adding tomorrow's worries. Mark Twain wrote, "I'm an old man and I've known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened."

Learn to live one day at a time. Today, God helps us with today. Tomorrow, God will help with that day. Same with the day after that. Today's trouble is enough for today. Have you ever tried to carry too many groceries at once? I've lost lettuce and lentils, meat and milk to the driveway or kitchen floor when I tried to take it all in one run. Struggling with too much baggage doesn't pay. Make multiple trips – to the car and to God. Carry today's bag today. Make a fresh trip tomorrow.

It's fair to wonder why so many needs go unmet if God knows our needs. But we might wonder if the poverty that grips the world is caused by God not providing resources or by too many of us misusing them because we live in scarcity mode? What would happen if we sought first the kingdom of God? What if we were as extravagant in showing our love to God through loving our neighbor as God is with us? Perhaps then all we need and more would be added unto us.

If you're a chronic worrier, maybe this will help. Make a "worry box. Cut a slit in the lid of a shoebox, then tape on the lid. When you start worrying, write down your worry and drop the paper in the box. Pray, "God, this is my concern. You've told me not to worry, so I'm putting this here and letting you have it. Whenever something's too big to handle, I'll put it here. Then, I'll practice trusting you to handle it for me."

A life of discipleship is characterized by a singular pursuit of God. It doesn't mean we won't work for necessities or acquire possessions. But that we commit ourselves to adopting the values, behaviors and priorities that God affirms. We do not strive or worry endlessly about our needs. Rather we look to God to provide, as God does for all of creation.

ⁱ usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2017-10/unraveling-threshers-story

ⁱⁱ According to the Bureau of Standards. Earl Nightingale "The Fog of Worry (Only 8% of Worries are Worth It)" from Earl Nightingale, *The Essence of Success*. Ed Carson V. Conant, as found at nightingale.com/articles/the-fog-of-worry-only-8-of-worries-are-worth-it/ November 4, 2017.