

Hello, this is Pastor Woods and this is the Daily Update and Devotion for Thursday, March 19.

It's not fun to feel afraid. Years ago I had the privilege of visiting with an elderly lady in our congregation named, Vivian. By the time I met her she had been living on her property her whole life and known no other home. No big deal right? Except she had so much fear of leaving the property that she hadn't left it for over twenty years—not for groceries, not for a doctor visit, not even for her mother's funeral. She depended on her nephew or friends to get what she needed. She couldn't define her fear but simply knew its hold on her. In effect she felt that it was necessary to stay sheltered in place--permanently.

Fear is hard to define and anxiety can become paralyzing to some. But does fear accomplish anything constructive? Some may argue that it gives us the good sense to avoid dangerous animals and to stay away from powerlines. But how much of that is really more a sense of caution and care. The difference between caution and fear may be a fine line but it is an important line to hold. Caution and care are exercised in love and proactive rather than reactive. Fear and anxiety are not seen as positive things in scripture. Fear and anxiety are usually associated with doubt and doubt it never a happy place.

Consider Jesus' words in Matthew 6:25-27 from His Sermon on the mount. Matthew 6 is especially potent for us Americans here in Southern Indiana, who are used to a certain level of comfort and security. In previous verses Jesus has just spoken about seeking first the kingdom of heaven and everything else will be added as well. And then Jesus teaches about anxiety--²⁵ "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?" ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?"

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Isn't this a great truth. Worrying cannot make things better. "Each day has enough trouble of it's own" is so true. And right now each day sure has all kinds of new troubles to stir things up. But let's be real. Worrying simply cannot improve the situation no matter how strongly we feel the pull of that anxiety. It cannot produce more toilet paper or chicken to buy. It cannot undo the damage of an illness such as a cold, or flu, or the Corona Virus. All it can do is complicate matters. Worse still, worrying is generally self-focused and usually not focused on any kind of love or concern for our neighbor. Jesus never healed anyone by worrying about them. In fact, Jesus never let anything or anyone get Him off of His game to serve the Father's will. And He has given us grace to do the same—to stay in the game.

In Matthew 6:25ff Jesus reveals first of all that God hasn't forgotten you. Life is more than food and more than clothes. Jesus came to seek and save us with His cross not make us fashionable or fill our bellies. Something more permanent is already in place in Jesus.

Think of it this way: Unless I look at pictures I can't remember what I wore at my niece's wedding a couple of years ago and I definitely can't remember what the menu was. I can remember that it was a great time and beautiful night, that my niece and her husband were glowingly happy, and that we enjoyed being with the family in Michigan very much. (For a Michigan boy it's always good to be in Michigan). And yet when a virus comes around somehow I'm supposed forget Jesus and worry about having enough food and toilet paper. What kind of faith would that be?

The most important thing we have is each other in all of this. I can't stress enough how great it is that we are close to our family and how cool it is that I can sit at the table for a meal with them even if it is just burnt hot-dogs—(Sorry about that Tricia. The Grill was on high.) What a

great time we have right now to exercise gratitude for what we have instead of worrying. By the way—gratitude is the mixture of grace plus attitude. Put the two together and you get gratitude—thankfulness filled with grace. Embrace this time with its opportunities and don't be afraid of it.

No one wants to be limited. I know I sure don't like being cooped up away from all of you. We certainly pray that the virus will go away and that our first responders and govt. leaders stay well. But within this time where we are tempted to worry I would invite you to look for the gifts Jesus brings within this experience. It is a time unlike any other. It will be uniquely remembered like the 37 flood that all the old-timers remember from their childhood. You have the chance to shape that experience. Now is a shared story that your kids and grandkids will remember being with you when it all happened.

Years back when Michigan was hit hard by an ice-storm our home in Clarkston was without power for a week. So, we all huddled in the basement in our new reality—grandparents, great-grandparents, siblings, cousins all gathered at our house. No personal space. And very uncomfortable. Without power we had way to run the well-pump and therefore no water either—ugh! We literally melted snow for water and cooked off the top of a buckstove like settlers on the frontier right in our basement where we kept warm. No TV—No internet back then—Yikes. But we did a lot of sledding and woodchopping, boiling water, and board games. Yea, we were all a little greasy by the end of the week, I won't lie. But in spite of the headache and drama of it I remember it with fondness and gratefulness that we had that shared experience.

And now even those of us who are members of Grace who live alone this is our shared experience with you too. Your stories and experience is as much a part of mine. And so, I choose not to let fear get a footing in my emotions or in my thinking. I choose joy because of the opportunity that I have with you rather than giving into worrying about something I have no control over anyway. I encourage you to choose joy and to give thanks for this extremely rare time that has become so basic and beautiful.

Matthew 6 is Jesus' truth not just mine. He's the one that tells us not to worry. We may get uncomfortable. We may even get sick. We can't always avoid those things anyway. On the other hand, we certainly want to be cautious and careful about such things. But again, that is a proactive mindset rather than a reactive one. Your Father knows what you need and certainly values you more than the birds of the air. I pray that you would trust in our Lord's wisdom in Matthew 6 and value these days. I would pray that you would remember to give thanks for what you have rather than worry about what you can't do much about. I would pray that your faith would be more real than the reality of our current state. I pray that Jesus fills our hearts more than your anxieties. And I pray that we take to heart the words of Philippians 4:6-7 which says, "Do not be anxious about anything, *but in every situation*, by prayer and petition, *with thanksgiving*, present your requests to God.⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." May the Lord's peace reign in the storm!

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord Look upon you with His favor and give you His peace.

Pastor Matthew Woods

John 3:30