

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost • August 7, 2016

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Luke 12:22-34

“High Anxiety”

What's there to worry about in America? The presidential election? Racial tensions? The threats of terrorism and violence in public? Well, maybe forget the “big picture” for the moment and focus on the scene closer to home. What could cause anxiety there? Diseases like Zika or cancer? Figuring out what activities you need to have to get into the right college, all the while keeping your grades up? Giving up time with your family in order to earn overtime for your car or your home? Ach!

It's pretty safe to say that our world offers an abundance of anxiety. High anxiety, even. At some point or another, we all feel it. Sometimes, it can seem overwhelming, like you're drowning in flood of fears and concerns about what's going to happen next. Even thinking about anxiety and worry gets me a little on edge.

If anxiety and worry don't sound like fun, there's a reason for it: they both seek to destroy hope. Worrying is getting caught up in uncertainty – usually about things that are outside your control. And in a culture where you're often told that you're supposed to be in control and shaping your own future, that means that we can be worrying about a whole lot of stuff. I've hear it said that worry is strength stolen from today that does nothing to improve tomorrow. That sounds like a fair description for a way of thinking and living that encourages you to seek after hope in things that don't have any real hope to offer. To put it another way, anxiety and worry try to turn your attention away from God, the loving Creator who knows your needs and cares for your future.

In our reading from Luke today, Jesus speaks to our human tendency to worry and be anxious. To clarify a bit: some people suffer from the medical condition of generalized anxiety disorder, but that's not the focus here. This is a more specific problem, one that applies to all of us. Jesus is addressing is our inclination to look to anything but God for lasting hope.

Jesus isn't saying, “Don't worry; be happy!” Some people point to this text to say that God will give you anything that you want. That misleading teaching both misses the point of what Jesus is saying and reinforces the underlying problem that's behind our worries.

We're tempted to use distractions to cover anxiety, things that we think will give even fleeting hope for the future. Now, as in Jesus' time, those distractions could be food and fine clothing. But we've got so many more options today! You can try to bury your worries under the shopping mall, the entertainment center, the workplace. They're all out there, letting you tell yourself, “If only I had *this*, then I'd be good.” But really, none of those options are ever enough. At best, they address the symptoms of worry and anxiety.

God alone deals directly with the cause of worry and anxiety: uncertainty. You can look to and depend on your heavenly Father instead of having to rely solely on yourself and your own strength – and your weakness. But God certainly cares for you. When we pray that prayer Jesus taught his disciples back in Luke 11, the Lord's Prayer, we ask for our daily bread. And God provides it! He provides what you need for body and life, going from day to day. Worry and anxiety would have you forget this and think instead about the next day, the next week, the next year, the next decade.

Here's a certainty from Jesus today that overcomes worry and anxiety: **You are of the Kingdom!** That's why you don't have to fear the future.

Jesus is talking to his disciples here in today's text, not the crowds. He's teaching the people who are already following him. He's talking to you and me. As he unpacks the parable of the rich fool – or, as we might hear it, the “parable of the average American” – Jesus calls us to consider where we put our hope for the future. Do we cling to stuff like the rich fool because we're secretly worried and fearful that God's grace isn't enough to take care of things?

On the cross, Jesus took care of the most important thing. He restored the relationship with our Creator that our fear and doubt about the future had broken. He reconnected us with our loving Father in heaven who gladly provides for all our needs of body and soul, whose will it is to make us a part of His Kingdom. Everything else in life is added out of the abundance of God's grace. God knows your needs, even as He knows those of the birds and the flowers. He knows them even better than you do. Thanks be to God for that!

Teaching his disciples, Jesus gives us imperatives for moving out from the parable of the rich fool. Consider, he says, how your Father cares and provides for you and for His Creation. God is working in so many ways from day to day, ways that are far beyond our ability to control or even comprehend. If you're looking for a sign of God's abiding care, reflect on that. But all the more, focus on the reality of God's Kingdom, which has broken into Creation to restore and reconcile all things in Jesus Christ. You are a part of the Kingdom. By God's grace, you are part of Jesus' mission to bring the Kingdom into the lives of your neighbors!

If your certainty comes from Christ, it just makes sense that you should put to use what you've been given. Selling your possessions and giving to the needy, then, is simply a sign that you're a servant of the one who has set before you the treasures of heaven. The greatest of those treasures: you are made complete, filled up in Jesus. And you get to share hope in him with the world.

As Jesus' disciples, we get to minister to others through prayer. Pray for your neighbor against the anxiety and worry that seeks to destroy their hope. Pray with them – out loud! – as a messenger of the certainty of God's love for His Creation and your neighbor, specifically. Pray for the world around us, that it may leave behind high anxiety for the peace that comes through Christ.

Yes, there's an abundance of anxiety in the world today. But God's grace in Jesus is overwhelmingly more abundant. Have no fear, little flock! In him, you have the Kingdom. In him, you have hope.

Amen.