

House, Bob needed a new spot to meet clients that was close to Woodward and near the bus line. The church parking lot seemed available at the time of day and like a good spot, so he'd started meeting folks here. When Bob and I eventually connected by phone, I learned more about what he was doing. A neighbor was helping neighbors right in our midst. We didn't need to worry; we didn't need to secure ourselves against the unknown. We needed to trust that God was already at work in each of Bob's interactions in the parking lot, in every offer of help.

In telling his disciples not to be like the rich fool, Jesus had a lot of clear, short directives. "Strive for the kingdom. Give alms. Do not be afraid." Those are all ways of trusting God rather than striving to store up treasure for ourselves or to protect ourselves against the unknown. Those are ways of giving God's voice in our lives more oxygen than we give our worries. It's not easy to do that these days, when worries are mounting. But when we turn our hearts toward scripture, it gives us a way to live in response to the troubles around us. Jesus said it's God's good pleasure to give you kingdom. Which means God wants to show us the wonder and joy of life lived God's way; of a world marked by compassion and kindness, justice and love, which may not be what we're seeing today, but which remains the kind of world God is leading us toward. And the kind of world God is urging us to build. That has not changed. In the times we work toward that world, it is God's kingdom we experience. It is God's kingdom come on earth.

News of the recent plane crashes has been devastating to watch. Back in November another small plane crashed in upstate New York. The plane was piloted by Seuk Kim, who was a volunteer pilot who frequently flew dogs who were about to be euthanized to no-kill shelters or other locations where they could be adopted.⁴ He had previously flown hundreds of animals to safety and was an advocate to get other pilots he knew to volunteer their time and resources as well. On the night of the crash, Kim was flying three dogs from Maryland to Albany. Unfortunately, Kim lost his life in the crash. But two of the dogs on the plane survived. One had two broken legs but is now back on its feet. And the other has healed from minor injuries. At the end of January, both dogs were adopted into their forever homes.

Through the tributes his family wrote about him, it's clear that Kim did not worry, but simply went about his life caring for others, caring for God's creatures. By his actions, Kim was trusting God, storing up treasure in heaven, striving for the kingdom. May we have the courage to transform our personal striving into generosity, our fear into faith, our anxiety into trust. And may that generosity, faith, and trust look something like reaching out a hand in compassion to the creatures and people around us.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

1 Gayle Boss, *All Creation Waits: The Advent Mystery of New Beginnings*, (Cambridge: Paraclete Press, 2016), 6.

2 Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherinton III, *The Gospel of Luke*, (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 347.

3 Levine and Witherinton, 248.

4 Raven Brunner, "2 Dogs find homes after surviving plane crash that killed rescue flight pilot trying to help them," *People*, January 31, 2025, <https://people.com/2-dogs-find-homes-after-surviving-plane-crash-that-killed-rescue-pilot-8783207>

February 9, 2025
Fifth Sunday of Epiphany
"Not to Worry"
Rev. Emma Nickel
Scripture: Luke 12:22-31

"Do not worry." That advice seems impossible, or insulting, or maybe even dangerous. But some of God's creatures know how to follow it. Painted turtles seem not to worry, every year, as fall turns to winter. At the edge of their murky ponds, painted turtles take a deep breath, swim for the warmer bottom, close their eyes, and bury themselves in the mud. In the darkness, their hearts slow and slow, very nearly coming to a stop. Their body temperature hovers just above freezing. Everything is so still that they don't need to breathe, which is good, because soon, the pond will be covered with ice and snow, and it will have almost no oxygen anyway. God's creatures, these turtles, huddled up and still, simply wait for spring. They were *made* to do this; or perhaps they evolved to do it. The turtles don't stress or toil, they simply exist, knowing that when the season shifts, they will reemerge, able to renew their life again. Gayle Boss writes in her Advent devotional: "at the heart of [the turtle's] stillness, [there is] something [the turtle] has no need to name, but something we might call *trust*."¹

Trust; trusting God. That is the positive way of saying, 'do not worry.' That was Jesus' advice to his disciples after telling them the parable of the rich man. Part of the meaning of that story was that security for yourself and excess stuff do not make for a good and faithful life. Instead, storing up treasure in heaven does; striving for what God intends for the world does. Jesus urges us not to focus on acquiring or storing up just for ourselves, which leads to an awful lot of worrying. Instead, think about neighbors and the people around you. Think about sharing. Trust God to care for your basic needs, so that you can care for others, too. When we do that, that's what real treasure looks like.

Now, a caveat is in order here. This story seems to be addressing worry related to basic needs and how we secure ourselves against the unknown, often by accumulating wealth. Jesus may not have been speaking to every possible worry of life we are faced with today, and I am clear there are a lot. Though I think his advice to avoid worry and focus on trust still holds, even in the situations where we are working for change or trying to protect others. With Jesus' context in mind, we know there are plenty of people in the world who really do need to worry about having enough to eat and proper clothes to wear. Jesus was not diminishing those real needs. He was in fact saying that God cares a lot about these important needs, both for creatures and for people. So we don't have to

worry about them precisely because God does worry about them for all of us. In addition, the gospel-writer Luke was initially writing his gospel for a wealthy man named Theophilus, named in chapter 1. So Luke included many stories about people in need, which served as instructions for how wealthier people like Theophilus could care for others.²

The balance between striving for ourselves and trusting in God is a tricky one. With new tariffs and trade wars, many of us are wondering if we should be worrying about our household budgets. The question often comes down to one of security. How much storing up and taking care of ourselves is the right amount? How much are we called to give away to help others be secure, too? What is the line between overzealous care for ourselves and adequate care for others?

This fall, our church leadership faced a question of security and trust, not as it relates to food and clothing but to the often-intangible notion of safety. Although the context is different, it illustrated for me the complexity of navigating between worry and trust. A few parents from our Sunflowers Christian Preschool began urging us to keep all the exterior doors of the church locked throughout the school day. To some of them, it was a matter of safety for the most vulnerable—the precious young children in our care. The Session responded right away. A small task force was formed to examine the issue. First, the members worked to understand our current safety measures and preparation. Our church keeps one exterior door open throughout the day, as long as it is staffed by someone at the reception desk. All the other doors to the outside remain locked. Then the task force met with staff to hear about the day-to-day operations of the church and community programs that use our building. Importantly, they scheduled a meeting with parents to hear their various perspectives and needs.

And then, these elders considered how our faith leads us in these difficult questions. What does true security and protection of the vulnerable look like in an age where anything can happen? What does hospitality to our neighbors mean when Jesus says that the whole of the gospel is to love God and to love neighbor? What does it mean to trust God when trust among the public is so low? These were not easy questions to sort out. The elders on the Session took seriously our commitment to the preschool families and to caring for the students. They also took seriously our commitment to welcome the strangers and neighbors who come to our door, whether to play at the Backyard Playroom, attend a Rotary Club meeting, or to ask for help in a time of need. Ultimately, they made the decision to ask that the preschool teachers lock and close their classroom door when class is in session. A video monitor has been installed at their door to facilitate this change. But that one front door, the door to this house of worship, the session voted to keep open when we are in the building.

The elders made a decision to try to put their trust in God, who cares for every hair on our heads. They decided to prepare and to act with safety in mind, and at the same time, to try not to let worry dominate our every move. Until we were faced with these questions, I didn't realize how much it meant to me to serve a congregation who values openness, both figuratively and literally. I didn't realize

how committed I am to someone being able to pull open the front door and find refuge here, whether they need a place to pray, a listening ear, a bathroom, or to attend an event we are hosting. This is not to say there weren't other faithful solutions to the question; but I support the one our elders made. We are seeking to navigate a path that values security for ourselves and those in our care, with a tangible commitment to welcoming our neighbors. We are trying to trust God and God's guidance. Though there are dangers in the world, which we cannot dismiss, this congregation is trying to let God guide our decisions more than we let our anxiety lead the way. As commentators Levine and Witherington write, "Jesus is not issuing a call to be careless or stupid. His call is to replace fear with faith, anxiety with trust, greed with generosity."³

In the teaching, Jesus said the lilies don't spin any cloth, yet God still clothes them with beauty. The ravens don't plant food or harvest it, yet God still feeds them. The call is to trust that God is already at work caring for us in so many ways. And therefore, we are freed to care for others in addition to and besides ourselves. When we do that, people who have real everyday needs get cared for, get fed, find security for themselves and shelter from the storms of life.

I am so glad you got to hear from Bob Schwarz today about the Here to Help Foundation. When his email newsletter gets sent out every month, I am almost made breathless with the powerful photos and stories shared in it. The help he offers returning citizens makes extraordinary transformations in people's lives possible. Certainly that is, in part, to do with the motivation of his clients to get their lives back on track after prison. But it is also because Bob knows what they really need: leads on jobs that will hire folks and pay a living wage; the right boots and clothes to wear for the job; a connection to a car dealer who will sell them a good, reliable vehicle; gift cards for furnishings so their house can be a home, and so on. Without this particular help, it's not clear how or if these folks would get back on their feet. Bob's name is well-known among returning citizens as the person to go to that can truly help them change their lives. And when we look at Here to Help, we see someone like Bob sharing what he has to help those who currently have need. For Christians, we see in that a picture of what it means to trust in God, to strive for God's kingdom.

This congregation has made a few donations to Here to Help over the past couple of years. Our biggest contribution, as you heard, has simply been use of the space in our parking lot. And that wasn't a given. Sometime during Covid, a few staff members were in the building in the late afternoons, and we kept seeing someone in a small SUV meeting up with folks each afternoon. It was Covid times, we were all high on anxiety and pretty low on trust. To be honest with you, I started to worry we had become the location of a drug buy. We called the police and asked them to monitor things, though nothing ever came of that. And then one day, a person scheduled to meet Bob came to the door, asking for him. We said, "who?" But then a little internet sleuthing turned up a news article with Bob's name and info about Here to Help. He'd been meeting up with folks to offer assistance at the old Nello's restaurant down the street. When that reopened as Zoe's Pancake