

## **The Folly of Adding Cubits**

Text: Psalm 23; Matthew 6: 25-33

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**A delightful conversation snuck up on me last Sunday.** It was the sort of thing that surprised me with perspective and made me smile at my own folly. Most of all, it refreshed me with the goodness and grace of life.

As I greeted at the door after worship, one of our members declared, "happy birthday!" then, after a pause, "it *is* your birthday isn't it?" I smiled back, "Thank you for remembering, yes, it's tomorrow." She continued, "I hope it's a good one for you." To which I responded, "It's a big one!" "How's that?" she puzzled. "You know, it's a birthday with a zero after the other number," I explained. "Heavens!" she said, "You are still so young! Don't let a single zero worry you! Some of us are getting close to having two zeroes after the other number."

Now, there's perspective for you. Lord knows I can always use a good dose of that! And when it comes wrapped with the kindness and humor like that, with a gentle smile and warm affection; and when it comes with an affirmation like, "you are still so young" -- it feels like pure gift!

**Sometimes, in the midst of life's important reminders, thoughts come just like that and bring me back to center.** They often arrive unanticipated and invite a benevolent sort of awakening. They invoke an "ah hah" moment as awareness ripples and rises. They show up with a smile as perspective and wisdom descend with grace.

Our lesson from Jesus for this morning is of that very sort. Just imagine: with gentle ease, he spread his words across the green hillsides of a breezy afternoon as his message lifted everyone to a higher and more life-giving place. It's among my top ten favorite passages in the Gospel. As a belated birthday present to me and, I hope, an affirming word for you, I invite us to listen as his lesson boils down to twelve<sup>1</sup> easy words.

**"Be not anxious!"** What a great way to begin! I rather suspect that it was seeing anxious and worried people around him that inspired him to speak and teach as he did. And he must have known, too, that in the real-time moments of life across time and age, anxiety and stress, tension and worry, are as near-constant companions along life's way.

Let me drill down a wee bit so that we don't skim in our listening. The word for worry here comes from the root word *merimnan*, a term meaning "undue or useless worry."<sup>2</sup> So, in context, Jesus isn't encouraging being so carefree that nothing ever concerns us; rather, he is identifying the kind of worry that gets us nowhere. And those who listened on that Palestinian hillside knew, just as we do: there are some things in life that are very much worthy of our anxious attention, and there are others that simply are not.

Etty Hillisum, a young Dutch woman in a Nazi concentration camp, understood the distinction that Jesus was making. Even in the harshest of conditions, these were her words: "We have to fight them daily, like fleas, those many small worries about the

morrow! They sap our energies! We must not allow ourselves to so be overcome and infested with thousands of petty fears and worries.ö<sup>3</sup>

**Jesus goes on, and in slight paraphrase: “beware the folly!”** In fact, he even goes so far as to give us this metric: öWho can add a cubit to his life by useless worry?ö And it’s so true, isn’t it? Sometimes we think that our worrying will resolve whatever the matter at hand, but in reality, we know deeper: they catch us in circular foolishness!

We are in the midst of planning a wedding for our daughter, Karen, and are filled with delight for her. But we are also filled with a whole new genre and experience of the foolishness of worry! What’s if it rains on August 10? Who’s on the guest list? What about inviting little kids? How can we ensure that everyone has a good time? What about hotel space in Provincetown on a mid-summer weekend? Good Lord, it’s enough to spin even the calmest of souls as is my dear wife!

Dale Carnegie once catalogued the folly of his own worries. Forty percent of his worries were about issues that were completely out of his control; thirty percent were about decisions already made; twelve percent involved fear about health, and ten percent were about his children. When all was said and done, ninety-two percent of his worries were about matters that would not change by a cubit!<sup>4</sup>

**Jesus again: “enlarge the picture.”** And, of course, for Jesus that day the metaphoric reflection of the natural world became his best material for expressing this. He gestured toward the healing presence of the natural world: öConsider the lilies . . . or the grass of the field . . . or the birds of the air.ö

In my more reflective moments each day I have come to enjoy both reading and writing poetry. It’s a prayerful sort of discipline for me. I love words and their descriptive power, and I am awed with the miracle of language. Mary Oliver<sup>5</sup> is a poet who has become a companion along my way.

*Hello, sun in my face.  
Hello, you who make the morning  
and spread it over the fields  
and into the faces of tulips  
and the nodding morning glories,  
and into the windows of, even, the  
miserable and the crotchety!*

*Best preacher that ever was,  
dear star, that just happens  
to be where you are in the universe  
to keep us from ever-darkness,  
to ease us with warm touching,  
to hold us with the great hands of light –  
good morning, good morning, good morning!*

So often the lessons of nature enlarge the picture as healing perspective descends!

**Three last words: “lean toward God.”** Trust that God knows what we need, come what may. That’s true for me and it is for you, too. The Psalmist tells us so: “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.” And Jesus, too: “Seek first the kingdom of God, your Father knows.”

As we celebrate our 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary here at First Church, a name near to our New England Congregational history comes to mind. Henry Ward Beecher was a progressive voice in his day, and a part of that larger family of influence with Lyman Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe. His words are just as apt now as they were then: “Every moment in life has two handles. We can take hold of it with the handle of anxiety, or with the handle of faith.”<sup>6</sup>

And that’s just right, isn’t it? We all know the difference! We can live with hands of worry on the handles of anxiety and fear; or we can extend our hands and take hold with faith and trust. That single choice is so pivotal. The first option leads us in a direction that is not too terribly helpful in the end. But the second one sets us free to live with peace and grace, with joy and hope.

**Be not anxious . . . beware the folly . . . enlarge the picture . . . lean toward God.**

So . . . happy birthday to me as I tell you of these things that I need to hear once again as I begin my seventh decade! Yikes! Did I say seventh decade? And happy January to each of you as, together and alone, we seek to plant the Good News of God deep in the heart of our days! In the Living Spirit of Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Though I am not one to paraphrase Jesus very often, these 12 words are based on a fairly well-educated hunch and understanding of the text!

<sup>2</sup> William Barclay. The Gospel of Matthew (Volume I). Westminster Press, 1975, p. 255.

<sup>3</sup> Etty Hillisum. An Interrupted Life. Owl Press, 1996, p. 218.

<sup>4</sup> James Underwood. Being Human, Being Hopeful. Abington Press, 1987, pp. 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Oliver. Why I Wake Early. Beacon Press, 2004, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Debby Applegate. The Most Famous Man in America. Doubleday, 2006.

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