

Matthew 14: 13-21

The End of Anxiety

Is it safe to say that the last several years since the economic crisis began that we have been given plenty to be anxious and fearful about? And of course now we have to hear a thousand times a day about the "Possible Domsday Scenario" of our debt ceiling limit played out in the news moment by moment---- with countdown clocks that count down our time to destruction in perfect rhythm with our rising fearfulness and anxiety.

I think that in times of prolonged uncertainty we just tend to feel utterly vulnerable all of the time. Our general worries about money and security become magnified and multiplied until I for one am finally just worn out from worrying about it. I think we are all truly hungry for even a small fragment of sanity to break through what increasingly feels like madness.

And besides, worry or anxiety is never a very helpful response to a crisis anyway is it? Whether crisis involves a global woe or is confined to the thousand and one ways life can break our hearts on a daily basis---can anyone here say that giving free rein to anxiety and worry about something has ever helped them in any particular situation?

All this brand of incessant worry really does is rob us of sleep, disturb our peace, and leave us too anxious to make good decisions or appreciate all the good things that are right in front of our eyes.

And we are an increasingly anxious culture aren't we? It almost seems like anxiety has replaced baseball as our national past time. When money was abundant we worried about whether or not we were getting a big enough piece of the pie. And now that money is a bit harder to come by we worry that we will never see that pie again!

In times like these we worry if there will ever be enough---not just enough money, but enough of everything. Will there be enough time for my 401K to regain its value? Will there be enough love in my life to heal the pain of betrayal, separation, job loss, grief or loneliness?

Will there be enough of *whatever* it takes to make me feel safe, secure and to satisfy the needs of my aching heart?¹

These kinds of questions, fed by our incessant, anxious worry, lead us straight into a feeling of constant scarcity. Scarcity is that mode where we assume there is never enough and so we must turn inward.

In scarcity mode the awareness of the needs of others fades into the background and we cling tightly to our emotional or financial resources hoarding them close in a fearful grasping. We say "What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours.

This kind of thinking is always dangerous, but especially when it blinds us to extraordinary abundance of God that is always ever-present before us.

And here's the deal---God's abundance cannot be measured on the Dow, the Nikkei, or NASDAQ. In our personal lives God's love cannot be measured by our "Friends" tally on Facebook. If you are looking to the stock market, the news, or social media to calm your fear and ease your worry, you are looking in the wrong place.

In times like these even faithful people can take their eyes off the source of all freedom from fear. It is so easy to take our eyes off Jesus and God's unlimited abundance. Jesus is the one who stands without fear before the hungry multitude in a world that sometimes feels starved of hope.

¹ Don Armentrout, Synthesis, July 2005.

Today we are reminded that it is Jesus who feeds us in both *body* and *soul*. He dramatically demonstrates that as the source of true life, his compassion and grace transcend our limited understanding and his gifts are more than ample to fill us full.

If we keep our eyes on Jesus and how he lived his life, *our* lives can then hold great abundance no matter what our present circumstances. And even in times when the rest of the world wants to inward in self preservation and scarcity, our hearts and minds can look outward with deep generosity, eager to share God's hope and abundance.

Jesus is here with a message of hope. Let's receive Jesus' gift and refuse today to be held captive by anxiety and scarcity ever again!

Jesus stands before us with the gift of food and the offer of his grace. And he offers us this gift of grace freely with no strings attached. This is not a loan and we do not have to pay interest. We do not need to sell our souls to the company store to feel secure in this world; we need only to trust in God's abundant compassion and grace.

Now, trusting in God's mercy and grace doesn't mean we'll never know loss or pain in life and I'm quite sure it doesn't mean that our 401K's will suddenly or miraculously regain their value if "the great crisis" comes. And it certainly doesn't mean we can trust in our political system to come together and resolve anything----that would be a greater miracle than the feeding of the five thousand!

But what trusting in God's grace *does mean* is that we do not have to compound our suffering by worry or fear. We do not have turn inward becoming tight balls of scarcity that have lost God's generous, divine spark. Living into the abundance of Christ's love we can remain open to others and avoid the fatal mistake of becoming a victim to the worlds panic.

Jesus teaches us that God *can* sooth the fractious human condition with a peace that surpasses all understanding. He asks us to put away our fears of "not enough-ness" and bank instead on God's promise of hope.

You may have even heard it said that "the opposite of faith is not doubt, but fear." When Jesus tells us not to be afraid, the implication isn't that our faith somehow makes us invulnerable.

But in Christ you see, our human vulnerability isn't a source of panic.

Our own vulnerability can be the very thing that finally opens our hearts to receive God's compassion and mercy. Vulnerability and hunger can be *precisely* the conditions which enable us to be transformed by God's grace.

Yes, these are troubled times. But fear not, Jesus stands before the hungry multitude and he takes blesses, breaks, some very meager resources and as he gives them.... God's unlimited, abundant, and everlasting love fills us with everything we need. If we keep our eye on Christ we need never be driven by anxiety or scarcity again.

In one way or another we are all drawn to God's table out of a hunger for something---and that hunger can be different for all of us. At the heart of it, we come to church because we have heard a rumor of a God who feeds the hungry and fills the soul. We are looking for that for which we long even if we're not quite sure just what it is we are longing for.²

Today we will share that abundant life--giving meal yet again. And in that moment when the bread and wine touches our tongues, we will have tasted the goodness of a day when there will be no more worry, no more scarcity, and no more fear.

But that is not all. In that moment we are offered an invitation and the strength to make that day a present reality---a truth for all in the here and now. At this table, in this weekly feast, God takes our hunger, blesses it, breaks it, and transforms it into an everlasting sign of abundance and hope. So all who hunger gather gladly, taste and see that God is good. Amen.

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² Brett Yarborough, *Lectionary Homiletics*, Volume XXII, 79.