

MATTHEW 6:25-33

²⁵"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you — you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

JOEL 2:21-27

²¹Do not fear, O soil;
be glad and rejoice,
for the Lord has done great things!
²²Do not fear, you animals of the field,
for the pastures of the wilderness are green;
the tree bears its fruit,
the fig tree and vine give their full yield.

²³O children of Zion, be glad
and rejoice in the Lord your God;
for he has given the early rain for your vindication,
he has poured down for you abundant rain,
the early and the later rain, as before.
²⁴The threshing floors shall be full of grain,
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.

²⁵I will repay you for the years
that the swarming locust has eaten,
the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,
my great army, which I sent against you.

²⁶You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,

and praise the name of the Lord your God,
who has dealt wondrously with you.
And my people shall never again be put to shame.
²⁷You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel,
and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other.
And my people shall never again be put to shame.

SERMON

Have any of you all seen the movie “Inside Out?” It was released by Pixar earlier this year, and it just came out on DVD a couple of weeks ago. The general premise of the movie is that 11-year old Riley and her family have just left their idyllic life in Minnesota and moved to San Francisco. Riley doesn’t like her new house, she doesn’t have any friends, she left behind her hockey team, and she’s angry with her parents for moving her so far away. The story of Inside Out is told from the point of view of Riley’s brain. Up in her brain, Riley has five emotions that are driving her actions: Joy, Sadness, Disgust, Fear, and Anger. Enoch particularly loves Anger, because when he gets all hot and bothered his head erupts into flames. Disgust is green in color, and she talks with that vocal lilt many of us associate with teenage girls. Fear is all angular and twitchy, constantly looking over his shoulder and jumping at the slightest provocation. It’s sort of a charming combination of cartoonish and relatable.

It’s a really compelling cartoon, not just because it’s cute and the storyline is engaging, but more so because it feels “true.” As Riley grows throughout the movie, she starts to learn and understand the interconnectedness of her own feelings and how they drive her behavior. In watching it, each of us, but especially children, are reminded that it’s very normal to not just be happy all the time. There will be moments and memories touched by sadness or anger, and sometimes fear drives our natural response to an unexpected

occurrence. Enoch asked me whether the movie was real or made up, and I struggled to answer his question, because, yikes! You try and explain allegory to a 4-year old!

I've been thinking about this movie a lot this week and really pondering that character of fear. As human beings, we're evolutionarily programmed to feel fear in all sorts of circumstances. On Thursday I was walking out of the office at the exact moment Michele was walking into it, thankfully we saw each other in time to avoid a collision, but both of sort of jumped back, startled by the unexpected sigh of the other. Or for any of you all who were out on the road driving yesterday, I hope you were driving slowly and giving the cars ahead of you tons of space. I know that's prudent and wise, but it's also a reaction driven by fear of the consequences we know are possible, driving on an icy, slick road. Sometimes as I'm writing a sermon I start to worry about it, I'm afraid of what you all will think of what I have to say. Is it smart enough or funny enough? What if I come off looking naïve or give a terrible interpretation of scripture? That's a fear of it's own.

Or I wonder this week at the reaction of so many people around out country to Syrian and Iraqi refugees. There was a call to limit or stop the resettlement of Syrian and Iraqi refugees in the United States by several dozen state governors, including our own, and a bipartisan vote in the House of Representatives to stop accepting refugees from this area until the federal government can assure the safety of the American people and not bring any erstwhile terrorists into the country through the refugee program. And all of that is rooted in fear. It's a reaction of the horrific attacks in Paris and Beirut and with the plane in Egypt or, even though it seems

unrelated, the hostage situation in Mali on Friday. We're afraid, and so we're circling the wagons.

We are biologically programmed to feel fear in all sorts of circumstances, but our natural reaction isn't always a good barometer of reality. Fear is an emotion that causes us to overreact.

And our scripture readings for today, both from the Gospel of Matthew and the book of Joel, they're really concerned with tamping down fear by expressing our gratitude, which is a pretty appropriate message for this week of celebrating all the things we're thankful for. The Bible says, no. Do not fear. Do not worry. Don't waste your time thinking about whether or not you're going to have food to eat or clothes to wear. Don't be afraid. God loves the flowers and the birds, how much more does God love you, the one made in God's image? Don't worry, rejoice, for God is bringing abundant rains. I love this line from the Book of Joel: "26You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. [...] 27You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other."

Do not be afraid, I am the Lord, I am your God and there is no other. Do not be afraid.

One of the things I appreciated most about the movie *Inside Out* is the character of Joy. One of the things she does so well is gratitude. Whenever the little girl, Riley, is feeling sad or afraid Joy immediately reaches for memories of things that made Riley happy. She would help her remember winning a hockey trophy or a fun day with her parents, and in that moment of being thankful, Riley's mood would improve. It's a pretty powerful message, that we can

push back against fear with gratitude. When we remember to be thankful for what we've already been given, we're less likely to be afraid of not having enough. When we're grateful for the family and friends in our community, it starts to cast out the fear of loneliness. When we express our gratitude for the warmth of our car heater and a decent defrost system, it partially mitigates the frustration of driving in a snow storm.

Or, perhaps, try this one on for size. When we can sit down to a meal to celebrate, remember, and give thanks for the people who welcomed us when we were religious refugees, landing on the stormy northeastern coast of America escaping religious and political persecution in Europe, I wonder if that gratitude can help us fight back against our own fears, and be a little more welcoming to the refugee coming ashore today? Think about our state, right? Michigan has a wonderful history of being an incredibly hospitable and welcoming state to people in need of refuge and a home. It hasn't always been an easy relationship, of course, but think about all of the fabulous cultures and people represented here. Eastern Europeans who came and settled throughout Hamtramck and brought with them their delicious paczkis. Over 30,000 Christians from Chaldea, settled in Detroit, finding safety from war and to practice their faith. One of the largest Middle Eastern communities outside of the Middle East, Muslims, Jews, Christians, and others, all gathered in Dearborn to create a new life for themselves and their children. Just this week, a Syrian family welcomed into Detroit. I would venture to guess that nearly every one of us here in this room was at one time a stranger in a strange land. Welcomed to a country built on a foundation of liberty and justice for all, the free exercise of religion, and a safe harbor from war. When we sit down to offer our

thanks for those first natives who welcomed the pilgrims, when we give thanks for the welcome each one of us has received, I think that gratitude starts to drown out the fear of the other.

Some of our fears are very specific and unique, others are far more universal and shared. I don't know what each one of you fear. But what I do know is this, the prophet Joel was on to something. He was writing and speaking to Israel following a great famine and drought across the land. The fear of not having enough to eat or drink, that the soil would produce no vegetation, that was a real fear. And he was on to something when he wrote to the people of Israel, so many thousands of years ago, "Do not fear, O soil...Do not fear, animals in the field...²³O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before. ²⁴The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil." Do not fear, remember that God has provided, and God will once again provide.

In this week of thanksgiving, let's use our gratitude to fight back against the fears of this world. We can trust the promises of Jesus when he says, "indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Be people of gratitude, people of righteousness, and in celebrating God's kingdom here and now, we will continue this good work of casting out the fear around us. Thanks be to God!