

Chelsea Cornelius
“Keep Calm and Carry On”
Matthew 6:25-34
Covenant Presbyterian Church
November 10, 2019

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? 26 Look 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? 27 And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28 And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30 But 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? 31 Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ 32 For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

“Well, it’s good to meet you. I’m so glad you’ll be working with our littlest patients.” These were some of the first words I received from a seasoned social worker in the hospital Newborn Intensive Care Unit, on one of my first days of work just last summer. I had worked in lots of ministry settings--churches, campus ministry, summer camp, county jail, but never a hospital. And so here I am, standing in the doorway of her bright office, leaning against the doorframe, wearing my brand new work ID badge that’s still

shiny from never being scuffed or scratched. Another chaplain stands next to me who was giving me a tour that morning. I don't know it yet but she'll be the one I'll learn everything about maternity chaplaincy from in the coming year. For now, she's just the chaplain with the lavender blazer giving me a tour. And now looking back at the social worker in all her cheerfulness I hear again this thing that caught my attention and I wouldn't forget--I was going to be working with "...our littlest patients."

I work at Meriter Hospital in Madison as a chaplain, where I now specialize in perinatal and intensive care and within that, newborn intensive care--the unit of the hospital where premature and high risk newborn babies are admitted after delivery for ongoing monitoring, treatment, and support. Most of the time, the babies on this unit are born in the hospital already--Meriter is the largest birthing unit in the state--and then moved to the NICU unit fairly quickly after delivery. Though other times, a baby is brought in by ambulance from somewhere else to ensure specialized care. Sometimes, a baby will spend a few nights in our NICU before heading home. Other times, weeks, months pass. And either way, no matter how they've arrived in this unit they are here--in this quiet, calm place with dimmed lights and hushed voices; monitors beeping, and oxygen provided; warming lights on, swaddled up and safe. For babies who have come into this world far too soon or still needing the support, nurturing, and space of growth their mother's womb was providing for them, a womb in the world has been created for them.

This is, of course, a very protected space, where the littlest lives are held carefully and quietly. Parents learn how to care for their newborn with the support of nurses, doctors, and specialists by their side. In a moment's notice someone will be right there to help. Still, with all this support, it is also an incredibly anxious space—a space of worry and wonder, fear and frailty where parents and family members of a newborn look on and hope their little one will make it through, hope their newborn will learn how to breathe

and eat and cry and regulate their own body temperature. Parents, grandparents, big siblings, everyone who is rooting for these kiddos looks on, and hopes; they watch, and wait, and worry.

So my job, or at least a big part of my job, is to witness this worry, and take it seriously. I walk through the NICU and into patient rooms where I find worried parents and ask them how they're doing and what they're worried about; I check in, as a source of calm or comfort, encouragement or just a listener. We celebrate small successes and sit in stillness when there are setbacks. I bless good wishes on babies who are on their way home and I bless babies whose lives end right where they began.

Sometimes--and this has happened--I am called not to the NICU but to a regular maternity unit where there's a baby who is just fine, big and warm and happy and bundled up ready to go home, but I am called in because the parents are worried. Parents, and especially when it's their first baby, have said to me, "They're about to just let us walk out of here with her, and...[we don't know if we're ready]. Can you say something or do something to make it feel like she'll be okay?" So I say blessings and wishes for these healthy babies and very nervous parents.

In all the in-between, and most of it is in-between, I sit with families as they wait and watch and worry. In the hospital, I work with the littlest patients, which often means I bear witness to the biggest worries.

Hospitals in general, as probably all of us know all too well, are a lot of the time places of healing and recovery but they are also places of worry, and fear, and anxiety. We are worried people. And with good reason. Given the current moment we are in together as a congregation as well, today, a Sunday in between All Saints Day, where we remember

and honor the lives we've lost and the loved ones who have gone before us, and our upcoming Sunday, Caregivers Sunday, honoring those who take care of others, I imagine this also means that we're sitting with the fact that those we've loved and lost and those we love and take care of (or take care of us) are also, probably, people we've worried about. People we do worry about; for the littlest people or the people we've known the longest or the ones who are on our minds the most--we worry. We are worried people.

And if I know anything about worry, it's that being told "don't worry" is pretty bad advice. If I'm feeling anxious someone telling me "Don't be anxious" is not going to comfort me, it's going to make me more anxious. It's the same as trying to comfort a friend who is crying by saying "Don't cry." It's too late--they've got to cry. Or if someone is rightfully upset, angry, or hurt and they're told to calm down--well nothing escalates a situation more than being told "calm down." This "keep calm and carry on" attitude leaves very little room for very real feelings.

Any of us who are in caregiving or counseling or human services work know this well--as a chaplain I do tell patients or families "don't worry" ever. And for any of us who work with or live with or are, ourselves, anxious people we know, when someone says "I'm worried" we probably shouldn't respond with "Don't worry." When something is wrong, *don't* keep calm and carry on. But why? Why, if we're worried people is it so off-putting so much of the time to be told "don't worry"?

Well, the things we worry about, are the things we carry about. That's why it's bad advice. That's why it hurts to hear "don't worry." Our worries are messengers, telling us what's at stake. Telling us what's important, who's important.

The late feminist poet Audre Lorde writes in her poem "A Litany of Survival":
For those of us

who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
[...]
when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.

We are “imprinted with fear” and “we were never meant to survive.” And so in the meantime our worry, our fear, reminds us that all these things, people, circumstances, pasts and presents and futures--big and small things--matter, and that we’re not always in control of the outcome. There’s something at stake. We worry about the things we care about; we worry because we’re vulnerable, and the things we care about are vulnerable. There’s a real chance it might all go wrong.

And so what to make, then, of this scripture where Jesus warns (or comforts?) his disciples by saying “*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? 26 Look 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? 27 And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28 And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these [lilies].” Don’t worry.

Well it turns out, “don’t worry” might be bad advice, but it’s not bad theology.

This is not advice from Jesus saying don’t worry about your life, your body, your needs, your health--as though these things don’t matter. You matter and this matters and for Jesus that’s precisely why he says do not worry. Jesus’ explanation is not advice, it’s a theology of vulnerability.

This is a theology that says consider the birds of the air, consider the lilies of the field. Consider the most vulnerable, and see how God takes good care. See how God shows up for us and provides for us and takes care of us not in our pleading and our worrying but in virtue of our vulnerability. God is a God that tends to the most vulnerable, and probably, asks us to do the same. Consider the birds and the lilies not because they set good examples for being carefree, but because they are vulnerable. Their capacities are such that they come into the world open, free-falling. And that God is a God of good care when they are--when we are--at our most vulnerable. They are able to “keep calm and carry on” because they keep calm knowing and trusting that *God* carries them along.

Jesus tells us: Consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, consider the most vulnerable among us. Consider yourselves among them.

If “don’t worry” is good theology, then we do well to be acquainted with our own vulnerability--to remember that our worry doesn’t earn us any more of God’s care but it does remind us of the vulnerability God tends to.

Consider the birds, the lilies, or the littlest among us— “Our littlest patients,” as a year and a half later I still hear our social worker chirp from time to time. Consider the birds and the lilies, and the babies in the hospital and their parents looking on.

The babies of the NICU know something--everything--about vulnerability. Their story is also one of coming into the world open, free-falling, gasping and crying and yearning and learning--needing precisely what Jesus mentions: something to eat, something to wear, somewhere to sleep, a place to learn how to be a body of their own.

When it comes to knowing our vulnerability, the littlest among us may be our greatest teachers. Outstretched and out of sorts these little lives reach out, yearning in body and spirit for someone to reach back. And surrounded by love and care and careful attention over and over someone does reach back and say “Here, I’m here.”

We might, indeed, be just as vulnerable; God might, indeed, be reaching right back out to us in all our worry and saying “Here, I’m here.” May it be so. Amen.