

After the Storm: Seeing With New Eyes
Matthew 6 and 7:1-5

I picked up a little book a few weeks ago, called *The life-changing magic of tidying up*. I bought it because a friend told me this book had changed her life. And we're always looking for something that promises to change our lives--right? This book is a guide to getting rid of the things that clutter your home and your life: clothes, paper, even books. The author, who is from Japan, makes it sound very simple, very Zen. I'll let you know when my life is changed.

Her basic method is "Discard anything that doesn't spark joy in you." And then she says this: "...When we really delve into the reasons for why we can't let something go, there are only two: an attachment to the past or a fear for the future." Either one of these thought patterns can make it hard to throw things away, she says, because when we're focused on either the past or the future, we can't see what we really need now, at this moment. And when we're unsure of what we need in the present, we keep adding possessions, in the illusion that they will make us feel full and well, satisfy some hunger that really isn't about possessions at all.

I think she's right about our tendency to get caught in the past and the future. Anxiety is another word for what she's describing. Anxiety often comes from a fear of what the future might bring—especially fear that it might bring suffering. But it can also come from our inability or unwillingness to accept the past, and the ways that past has shaped how things are now: the way I am, my relationships, my sense of my place in other people's eyes. Our disappointment is already there. We carry it, in our eyes; and we project it onto other people and onto the rest of the world. We have been disappointed before. We are sure that the future will also fall short of our hopes.

Anxiety may be one of the most common parts of human experience. We all know what it's like to have butterflies in your stomach before you have to speak in public, to worry when someone you love doesn't get home on time, to fear whatever it is that made that noise in the dark. But there is a more pervasive and longer-lasting anxiety, the kind that doesn't go away when the noise stops or your loved one arrives. It's inside of us, and it shapes the way we see everything around us. We obsess—about our bodies, our food, our money. We worry about the things that are out of our control. We fear losing someone we love, and so we grasp and cling and smother. We catastrophize small difficulties, as if dark clouds are our home and our energy. We worry—as if we could change things by thinking about them more.

We can drive a whole system—a life, a family, a community, even a nation—on the energy of anxiety and fear. And it is toxic. It can kill us.

This is what Jesus was talking about in the part of his Sermon on the Mount that we read this morning. Your anxiety is more dangerous than whatever it is you're anxious about, he said. Clothes, food, money, a place to live—they're important. Important enough that God has made sure that even creatures that can't take care of themselves—flowers and birds—have them. It isn't those things that are harmful to you, Jesus says; it's your constant worry about them. It

niggles at the back of your mind; it digs holes in the foundations of your relationships. It gets in your eyes and fogs up your vision, so that you can't see anything else clearly.

And then he says this: anxiety and judgment are related to each other. They're sisters, joined at the hip. Anxious people are judgmental people. When we are anxious about our own well-being, or whether we are good enough, we project our vulnerability and our fear onto other people. In our minds, and sometimes with our words and our actions, we compare ourselves with others. We compete for limited space in the arena of what seems best, or even acceptable. And ultimately we condemn other peopleⁱⁱ--as though our judgment of them can form a kind of shield around us. Someone else has to look like less, so that we can feel like more.

When you are driven by your anxiety, Jesus said, it's like you have a log in your eye. It can't help but make other people's flaws appear distorted. Franciscan priest and theologian Richard Rohr put it this way: We don't see things as they are, actually. We see things as *we* are.

Almost all spiritual teachers—Jesus, the Buddha, Mohammed, the Dalai Lama—have said the same thing: “Do not judge.” They knew that fear and judgment keep us from seeing truly, opening our eyes so that we can be fully present. If we start by labeling, analyzing, categorizing things as good or bad, jumping too quickly to “I like it,” or “I don't,” it's like we put a layer of “no” in between us and the people and things that come into our vision, a layer that keeps us from understanding them, opening our hearts. This doesn't mean that we have to take in everything we see. “No” can be an appropriate word—even a sacred word. But starting with “no” often means we are so defended by our immediate judgments that we can't accept something new, so defensive that changing our minds is impossible.

This is hard. For many of us, our tendency to move quickly to judgment is a lifelong pattern, hard to manage, just like our anxiety. But Jesus isn't just drilling us to muscle up and get this anxiety problem under control. Instead, he makes an amazing, almost unbelievable promise. He says, *If you seek God's kingdom and justice first, if you love others before you spend all your energy trying to protect yourself, everything else you need—financially, physically, socially—will be given to you.*

Really? Did Jesus actually believe that? I heard someone say once that if you read that promise superficially, it could only have been made by a single guy living a carefree life on the beach in sunny Galilee. But I don't think Jesus said it casually or flippantly. He meant it to sound as radical as it does. There is nothing moderate or common-sense-ical about this message. It is *im-moderate*, risky, scarily absolute in the trust it asks of us. As someone put it once (Stephen Patterson), it's about “a God who demands all and a God who gives all.”

I resist. I still want to make a case for prudence, the need for a reasonable measure of anxiety, a do-it-yourself responsibility for my own security. But the trial lawyer in me is collecting evidence, stories, that might prove that Jesus knew what he was talking about. And I think those stories are everywhere around us.

Lenora Blouin, who is right here in the sanctuary this morning, told me just this week about a time when she was in college, far away from home, cut off from the family that had supported

her emotionally and financially. She was so poor that she often didn't know how she would find her next meal. And every time, something came. Once it was a truck carrying corn, that lost part of its load right in front of her as it lurched over a bump in the road. Another time a check arrived, charity from a congregation that didn't know her at all but surprised her with an act of generosity. Never very much, never enough to take care of all the days ahead. But enough to get her through *that* day, that moment of worry.

If I take seriously this Teacher whose life I want to be the pattern for my own, I have to doubt my first reactions, my own life-long patterns—my *common sense*--that has been formed and nurtured by an anxious culture. Trusting things that are finite and scarce, Jesus was saying, will always get you in trouble. There will never be enough money, enough of other people's admiration, enough of your own power and control, to make you well. When you trust in things that are scarce, you can't help but count, stockpile, compare what you have with others'. When you trust in things that are scarce, fear and anxiety and judgment are natural.

Instead, he said, put your trust in what is abundant, the things that will never run out or be eked out from a limited supply. Put your trust in the love and acceptance, forgiveness and generosity of a God who doesn't keep track of wrongs or look for payment or hoard power—ever. A God who is able to take all things—even something as fearful as death—and make life out of them.

Richard Rohr made a list once of what a life looks like when it is freed from anxiety and worry and judgment. A “joyful mind” he called it. Here are some of its characteristics:

You no longer need to compare yourself with others.

You no longer need to compete—not even in your own head.

You do not need to analyze or judge things as in or out, positive or negative.

Your mind is curious and interested, not suspicious and interrogating.

You do not brood over injuries.

You do not need to humiliate, critique or defeat people who have hurt you—not even in your mind.

Your mind does not need to create self-justifying story lines.

You do not need the future to be better than today.

You can accept yourself as you are, warts and all.

You can find truth on both sides of most things.

You fill in gaps with the benefit of the doubt for both friend and enemy.

You can wait, listen and learn.

You can forgive and actually forget.

You find signs of God in all things.

A joyful, un-anxious, non-judging mind. It's possible. And it actually *would* change your life. May it be so for us.

ⁱ Marie Kondo, *The life-changing magic of tidying up*, p. 181

ⁱⁱ The litany of “compare, compete, condemn” is from Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now*