

Do Not Fret

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

July 21, 2024, Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Psalms 23 & 37; Philippians 4:4-9; Matthew 5:1-12, 6:25-27, 31a, 33-34

Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, an Open and Affirming Congregation, on this Ninth Sunday after Pentecost. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and welcome to you online.

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. We share the belief that the land and all life are gifts of the Spirit, and our role is to honor and protect the creation, building a loving community that includes all.

Brian McLaren is the pastor and theologian who wrote the book *Life After Doom: Wisdom and Courage for a World Falling Apart*. One of the most fascinating chapters in that book points to Indigenous spiritual wisdom as a guide for anyone living in a society that is being controlled or destroyed by the super-rich and super-powerful as indigenous cultures have been.

McLaren points out that the entire Bible, the entire Judeo-Christian scriptures are actually the writings of an indigenous people struggling against the forces of greed and empire. Think about it. He calls Jesus an indigenous spiritual teacher.

If you read the Bible in that light, you see leap out all the teachings about the power of the small and meek who gather as a love group in a world of fear and hate, and about the Spirit of the earth flowing through a loving heart as the greatest force in the universe that can enable us to overcome the powers of fearful hate and greed.

Compassion, mercy and kindness, through courageous acts of love, will still be blessing the earth as materialist human structures self-destruct. Indigenous wisdom knows this.

So let us value being a small and meek village church in Vermont, and let us value and extend our welcome and care to one another so that everyone here and in the world around us experiences the love that is the most powerful answer to fear.

Call to Worship Two people have asked me to address the fear that is pervading our society and many of our hearts and minds right now. I welcomed the request especially because I

am right there with everyone who is fretting about what is happening in our nation and world.

Fret comes from an Old English word meaning to eat. Fret means to be consumed by constant, compulsive anxiety or fear. We have so many valid global or personal opportunities to fret these days, the world is truly worrisome.

Yet, as the *Dune* novels put it, fear is a “little death” of the heart and mind that can lead to “total obliteration.” The *Dune* novels are full of references to the Bible, so Frank Herbert probably was thinking of Psalm 37 that says, “Do not fret—it leads only to evil.”

Both *Dune* and the scriptures call us to face the truth of our fears and find the path through and beyond them. We can look for spiritual wisdom and inspiration in the words, music, silence and people around us today. May we find a way through fear to the peace and courage we need to create a more compassionate, loving and kind world. Let us worship together...

Call to Confession Fear is natural. It has its use and its gifts. Fear can give us good information, it can tell us what needs to change.

It can also eat us alive, or hold us back from doing what we want or need to do. Fear can drive out love as surely as love drives out fear.

To be useful and a gift fear requires that we be mindful and intentional about it, facing it in a spiritual, emotional and psychological context, as well as a situational one.

What are you fearing, what are you anxious about these days? Let us confess our truth and observe what it is saying or doing to our spirit, heart and mind....

Assurance of Pardon Whoever or whatever else God may be, God is a name for the Spirit of love flowing within and around us. Whenever we are afraid, we can rest assured that God has loved us, loves us now and will love us always, we are held in a love that can calm all fear. We are created and called to share that love with the world.

Let us respond in that faith by saying the King James Version of the 23rd Psalm together...

Do Not Fret

I suspect that you did not have any trouble during our prayer of confession thinking of something that is making you anxious or afraid these days.

A bumper sticker says, “If you are not outraged, you are not paying attention.” Today it could be rewritten to say if you are not afraid, or if you are not fretting, you are not paying attention.

We are not the first to live in scary or threatening times, and people have felt a natural fear of personal loss or pain or death from the beginning of time. Spiritual traditions exist in part to hand down teachings to help us manage, reduce and overcome our fear.

I hope you will continue to reflect on the beautiful wisdom of the 37th Psalm, and the 23rd, and the excerpts from the Sermon on the Mount that we heard, as well as today’s songs and hymns.

This sermon will share some of the spiritual wisdom that I find particularly helpful in my own struggles with fretting and fear right now.

First, fear is often right, it is useful, it brings us gifts, it is even holy, part of the sacred way. Our fight, flight, freeze or fawn responses are hardwired. So we need to bring understanding and compassion to our own fearful selves.

Second, many people have said, “The only thing to fear is fear itself,” from Henry David Thoreau in his nonviolent protest against systemic violence and injustice, to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt speaking in the Great Depression, to the people of London who heard Nazi bombs falling for 56 straight days when tens of thousands of Londoners died and hundreds of thousands had their homes destroyed.

What they feared was letting fear turn into fretting and rob their strength and fog their mind. They feared losing their courage to keep living, and to keep working toward a world beyond fear.

It helps to remember that the purpose of fear is to manage or escape a dangerous situation so that we can return to relative security, a place of love and peace and the things that make for peace. Fear is designed to move us toward a world where we do not need to feel fear.

So what we really need is to become skilled at fear. That means we need stable, long lasting organizations or structures that collect and pass along and train us in wisdom from spiritual traditions and from contemporary wisdom keepers. And we need multi-generational support groups to walk with us through our hardest times. In other words, we need something

like a church. Part of our response to our fear needs to be thinking together about how we can continue to have a spiritual organization in a world where churches are an endangered species.

Contemplative groups and contemplative teachers are a crucial part of that, because mindfulness and meditation, or heartfulness and centering prayer, give us the most effective skills for listening to our fear and then letting it go so that we can respond creatively and effectively to what we face.

We also need training to detect what is not useful. For instance, Teddy Roosevelt said that to live safely in a dangerous world we should “walk softly and carry a big stick.” In recent years we have had political leaders and their families posing with semi-automatic rifles on their Christmas cards.

But nowhere in the beatitudes does Jesus say, “Blessed are those who carry a big stick.” The 23rd Psalm says, “Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me,” but it is the Good Shepherd who has the stick—as for us, we are to be like sheep, vulnerable and nonviolent, walking through the truly scary valley of the shadow of death and finding the higher power of love there that overcomes our fear.

Jesus says “Blessed are the meek.” Blessed are you when others persecute you with their big sticks just because you are trying to walk in the ways of love and mercy and peace. Jesus did not carry a big stick, he was nailed to a big stick because he insisted on the way of love and believed that it was right and ultimately more powerful than what his fear would have had him do.

Jesus understood that people on fixed incomes would be reasonably worried about food and clothing. Jesus understood that we could all be afraid of dying, but he gently insists that we not fret, that we turn away from our fear and look to the spiritual realm and its right way of being and trust, as hard as it may be, that by following the vulnerable ways of compassionate, generous-hearted love, we will enter the realm of God on earth and have the best life we can.

Someone shared with me recently that in her first responder training she was taught that step one in a scary emergency is to have a cigarette—meaning to pause, take a breath, listen, look and assess. Step one is to allow your brain to go through the fear response and follow the path to a calmer, wiser place.

“Do not fret” does not mean do not fear, it means do not let fear consume you, do not hold onto it and cling to it. Let it go so you can cling to peace and love, and life and light, instead.

Drowning people naturally fear and fret and flail, but when a lifeguard reaches them, if they continue to fret and flail, the lifeguard will not be able to help them and in fact could be drowned by them.

One of the big reasons that fretting “leads only to evil” is that it drowns out everything but the voice of fear, so we cannot listen to the voice of the lifeguard, we cannot hear the sacred way of love calling us to do what can save us.

The final piece of spiritual wisdom I want to share with you is captured by the fable of the cat and the fox. The fox boasts that he knows many ways to escape the dogs, and the cat replies, I know only one way, but it always works. Then they hear the dogs coming fast and the cat quickly but confidently scoots high up into a tree, while the fox frets and cannot think clearly or decisively and sure enough, it leads to evil for him.

Like the cat, we have one thing we can always do in the face of fearful situations. I have said in many a children’s time that the one thing is to pray. Prayer is how we go up the tree. Prayer is the first responder’s cigarette.

But prayer is just the start. Prayer opens us to rational consciousness and to our deeper wisdom, our intuition and creativity, our higher power.

It enables us to change from the path of fear to the sacred way of love. It frees us to respond to a scary situation not by constricting and clenching, but by opening our hands to do works of love and peace and the things that make for peace.

We do not need to fret because our work is the same no matter who gets elected in November. Our work is the same whether we live in a world that is turning climate change around or a world that is speeding toward collapse and extinction.

Our task is the same whatever comes, fear or no fear. It is to see the light that shines in the darkness that the darkness can never overcome, and shine that light boldly, whatever our situation. Our task is to show the way of love in everything we say and do, building and modeling the world around us that we believe is best and that we want for those we love.

Jesus was terrified in the Garden of Gethsemane. The Buddha was fretting over the suffering in the world, near despair, before he sat under that Bodhi tree. The Psalmists who said “Do not fret,” and “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,” were as threatened as we are. They found and shined their light not because it was easy, but because the

Spirit needed it. The Spirit needed them to model what the world could be and to show the way through fear to love and peace, and they did it for us.

Now we get to do it for others. The more fearful the time, the more brilliant the light of human courage and love. Now is our opportunity to pass along to future generations the beauty of the triumphant human heart, undefeated by fear.

Let us pray together in silence...

Haiku by Mel. Goertz
Old age requires effort,
but the song sparrow
still sings in the tree.