

MIRACLE GROW

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
June 13, 2021

2 Corinthians 5:1-10, 14-17
Mark 4:26-34

I have some old friends—a couple who live in the country—who complement one another in an interesting way. He is a gardener and she is a worrier. The gardener is a pretty easy-going fellow. Every May or June he comes through the door with a brown paper sack full of seed packets and a couple of evenings later he can be found pattering around the yard, emptying the packages into shallow furrows, heaping the dirt into little mounds and curling pieces of fence around them to keep the deer out. Several weeks later, plants appear in the strangest places. He has been known to plant green peppers between the azalea bushes and broccoli by the mailbox. For the second year in a row a stand of asparagus is pushing up through the roots of the crepe myrtle tree and sweet pea vines are winding through the branches of the weeping cherry. In a few weeks, string beans will overtake the back deck of the house, covering everything in sight like kudzu.

All of this drives the worrier crazy. She knows how gardens are supposed to be and this is not it. You are supposed to begin by buying a book, for one thing, with illustrations on how to arrange plants according to size, height, and drainage requirements. Everything goes in straight rows. First you must test the soil; then you must fertilize, mulch, weed, and water; above all you must worry, or else how will your garden grow?

To her eternal dismay and amazement, there comes one day every summer when the gardener proclaims that the vegetables are ready. He goes out to collect them from all over the burgeoning yard and a little while later the worrier sits down to a table heaped with manna. Against her will and better judgment she has to admit that he has done all right, in spite of his refusal to worry. Last year there were even two dill plants that appeared out of nowhere, gifts from the earth itself.

This is what the kingdom of God is like, according to Mark. A man scatters seed on the ground and goes about his business, trusting the seed to sprout without his further interference, because the ground produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. The Greek here is wonderful: the ground is, literally, *automatic*. It produces of itself; it has within itself the power to make a seed become a plant, and so the kingdom of God is likened to automatic earth, earth that can be trusted to yield its fruit without any cheerleading, any manure, any worry on our part. The seed sprouts and grows, we know not how. Call it agricultural grace.

All right then. Those of us who garden—or watch over gardeners—need not worry any more about our string beans and squash—the automatic earth can be trusted—but what about our lives? There is nothing automatic about that. If I do not attend to my life, manage it and yes, worry about it, I will fail at what I want to do, be found wanting

at the end, die unsatisfied and unnoticed. Help! Saint Paul is right; in this earthly tent I do groan, do sigh with anxiety, but not exactly for the reasons he says.

When I first read today's passage from 2 Corinthians out loud, I began by nodding my head a lot. "We know," Paul says, "that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed we have a building from God." *Well, yes, we hope that. Can't be too presumptuous, after all, can't really know, but yes, a building to replace this tent sounds heavenly.* "Here indeed we groan." *Do we ever groan; yessirree, he is right about that. And anxiety?* "We sigh with anxiety." *What a mind reader; that is exactly what we do.* "So that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life"—*what a beautiful phrase, swallowed up by life.* "So we are always of good courage"—*well, we try. We may not always be courageous, but we are brave from time to time—*"and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord." *What was that? Actually, we sort of like it here in the body, all things considered. There is no particular hurry to leave, is there?* "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ." *Oh groan, here comes the anxiety again.*

Paul names the big worries, death and judgment, but fill in your own variations: terrorist attacks, COVID, cancer, poverty, divorce, addiction, pollution. What is it that makes your heart chatter in your chest? What feeds your ulcer, makes your shoulders cramp, keeps you awake at night? Where are you busiest protecting yourself and those you love? Where does it seem as if there is ultimately no hope, and where is it in particular that you do not quite trust God to be God? Someone says, "Have faith!" and you want to break something, want to shout, "Faith is not enough!"

We live in an age of anxiety. To go back to the agricultural metaphor, we live between the time of planting and the harvest, and it is a time of great uncertainty. We want to trust the automatic earth. We want to believe that what God has begun God will bring to fruition, but just in case God doesn't we hedge our bets, doing everything we can think of to keep the anxiety at bay. Sometimes we call what we are doing "helping God out." Sure, we can trust God with our lives, but just to help God along we frequent the health food shop, the investment broker, the insurance agent, maybe even duck into the astrologer's storefront to have our palms read—just for fun—to see what is ahead. Anything to batten down the hatches, to make the future look a little more secure.

But that is only one symptom of anxiety. There are lots more. Like *perfectionism*, the need to do everything exactly right, according to the book, so that there can be no doubt about our superiority. Or *drivenness*, that compulsion that turns all our "want to's" into "have to's," that raises our demands on ourselves and others to a fever pitch. There is *moral outrage*, our insistence that we who have worked so hard have earned the right to be protected from all harm, because bad things should not happen to good people. Or how about *restlessness*: the swinging foot, the tapping finger, the vague unease that says we should never be where we are but somewhere else instead. We cannot sleep, cannot sit still for long; got to keep moving, got to stay busy. Then there is the *dread of being alone*. Faced with the prospect of a night at home by ourselves, we get on the telephone and see what we can rustle up or, failing that, settle into five or six hours of fellowship with the television set or online games. Along with that estrangement from self comes *estrangement from God*, where we buy books on spirituality but read mysteries instead.

Or we mean to pray but it is hard to find the time and when we do, we fall asleep. Sometimes it just seems as if there is nobody there.

The word is anxiety, *angst* in German: a straight or narrow passage that restricts breathing; uneasiness or trouble of mind about some uncertain event, such as my life, my death, my relationship with God. Anxiety is so much a part of modern life that it seems automatic, an occupational hazard of being a finite creature in a universe of infinite possibilities. But anxiety is more than that, more than just a quirk of my creatureliness to be taken for granted. Insofar as my anxiety separates me from God, from other human beings, and from my own soul, I am prepared to call anxiety a sin, one that calls for my repentance because it keeps me in limbo, telling me on one hand that I must work out my own salvation and on the other that I am doomed to fail. In short, what is absent when anxiety is present is faith—faith that God will be God, that the automatic earth will yield its fruit, that life can be trusted.

I am not, of course, advocating that we all lie down under the nearest fig tree and watch the clouds go by, although that might not be a bad idea for most of us. Giving up anxiety does not mean giving up responsibility, or concern, or the wish to live a productive life. But it does mean giving up our incessant, sterile worrying about what will become of us and our poisonous illusion that if we do stop worrying our lives will collapse. This is sin, and the remedy for it is twofold: first confession and then amendment of life. Do you desire to be saved from the sin of anxiety? Then get on your knees and confess it. Confess everything you have tried to control, all the ways you have tried to manufacture your own security, all the times you have turned away from God in order to seek your own solutions. Confess what it has cost you, and how poorly it has worked to bring you peace. Then ask for forgiveness, the forgiveness that is yours before you ask, and within the freedom of that forgiveness amend your life. Make a different choice, a choice against anxiety, and live out of that choice for a change.

Saint Paul's word is as good as any: choose courage, which is not the absence of fear but the willingness to go on in spite of it. Choose to face your life, your death, your God, the dangerous unknown. Choose to face it without resorting to the old perfectionism, the old drivenness, the old restlessness and outrage. Choose courage, even knowing as you do that you cannot choose it once and for all, that if courage is what you want, you must choose it over and over again, every day that you live, if real living is what you are after. That is what it takes. Confession and choice, forgiveness and courage, over and over, a new way of life.

Then scatter your seeds. Anxiety would have you keep them in your pocket, or plant them in small pots, or dig them up every day to see if they are growing. Courage allows you to open your hand and let them fly. They land where they land, and a few feed the birds, but many more fall into the ground. There in the dark, where you cannot see and do not know how, the automatic earth turns their death into life, pushing up through layers of dirt, through asphalt, through concrete if necessary, through whatever is in their way—first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. Then it is your turn, you who have watched and waited faithfully, knowing you cannot make the seed grow, knowing who can. It is your turn to harvest the crop, and let your table be heaped with good things, and sit down at it, and eat.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.