

Holding Tight
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I went into Trader Joe's on Thursday, and it was like a slightly choosy zombie apocalypse was happening. There were still options, and I even got some tissues, but other paper goods and anything in a can was not going to happen. I was walking down the aisle where only olive oil and condiments remained and remembered that our olive oil was getting low. I started to reach for what appeared to be the last bottle of organic olive oil, and then a person came up beside me, and snagged it. I was flummoxed. And then I crouched down low, and saw a different kind of organic olive oil in a small container way back on the shelf, so I grabbed it and moved on. Did that person even realize that I was about to reach for the same thing? Very unlikely. She was probably thinking - "Score! I got the last olive oil" and went home to tell the story of the zombie apocalypse Trader Joe's and the last bottle of olive oil. This was a little thing, a very little thing, but a moment for reflecting on how our stories intersect, and how we approach the little things in the midst of bigger challenges.

Apocalypse means to uncover¹, and these unprecedented times are certainly doing that. The cracks in our societal infrastructure, which are always there, have been uncovered in new ways. I have heard a lot about paid leave and universal healthcare in the news this week. Some folks have jobs where they can work remotely, I am lucky to be in that camp, but some of those same folks also have kids that are home from school, and no child care, which is going to make that work hard. Some folks have kids home from school, no child care, and they are going to have to go into work, because if they don't they won't be able to cover the two weeks of groceries they purchased this week, or make rent, and on and on. Some folks are going to work while sick. Some kids aren't going to have access to needed school lunches. In some communities the school buses will still be circling, but instead of picking up kids, they will be dropping off lunch. People will be working to make those lunches and drive those buses, and check out our groceries, and keep things moving along. We are engaging in this vast change in freedom of movement and gathering, education and economics with the hope and expectation that by slowing things down, we can make this outbreak manageable for our healthcare system, and hopefully save lives.

In the Book of Matthew, Chapter 6, Jesus says as part of the Sermon on the Mount:

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? 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? (*we will talk about this another Sunday...*) And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. (6:25-29)

1 Thanks to adrienne maree brown for reminding me of this: <http://adriennemareebrown.net/>

The Sermon on the Mount is a series of teachings from Jesus that include the Beatitudes--blessed are the etceteras, the Lord's Prayer, and lessons like this one. As we spoke about in Second Sunday School last week, these lessons, and in particular this one, have been used to justify a number of theologies and choices. One could use this teaching to support a monastic life of chosen poverty, living on what is provided by God through the people. One could also use this teaching to talk about how we ascribe value to things that have no inherent value—that we should learn from birds and lilies who are not swayed by the material world. Either reading could be paired with a conversation about attachment, which is why I included it today. In this lesson, Jesus encourages the listeners not to be attached to the material world, and to that over which we have no control. “Can you by your worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” I come back to this teaching a lot when I am feeling stuck in a spiral of worry. Sometimes I answer myself *and Jesus* and say, petulantly, ‘Yes, when I worry, I sometimes make choices that make me safer.’ But here is the crux of that question, when I worry, do I make choices that are helpful because of or in spite of that worry?

For my work at Amherst, I made the decision to work from home starting tomorrow. I took home all my computer gear on Friday and will be setting up shop in our cedar closet/office this afternoon. Tadd was feeling a little under the weather on Friday, and we think is totally fine, but I made the call at that time. I thought that decision would help me. No more wondering each day if that would be my last day working physically in the office, but then, yesterday I started spinning around in my mind about how long this might last, and there is absolutely no control that I have over that. I have a story that I tell myself that I if I read enough or the right news stories that I will know what will happen, but that isn't real.

As we manage our response to this pandemic, there are some things we can control, some choices we can make, but we can't *know* exactly what will happen. We are taking lots of small actions that will hopefully add up to big change in the trajectory of this pandemic. Once we have made our choices and acted, does our worry help in any way? Not that I can think of. Our attachment to control leads to things like buying out every roll of toilet paper in the entire United States. This reminds me of a Buddhist story:

You see this goblet?” asks Achaan Chaa, the Thai meditation master. “For me this glass is already broken. I enjoy it; I drink out of it. It holds my water admirably, sometimes even reflecting the sun in beautiful patterns. If I should tap it, it has a lovely ring to it. But when I put this glass on the shelf and the wind knocks it over or my elbow brushes it off the table and it falls to the ground and shatters, I say, ‘Of course.’ When I understand that the glass is already broken, every moment with it is precious.²

As we hold the tension between cautious preparedness and panic, I invite us to remember that the glass is already broken. We will never know everything or respond perfectly. If we spend our lives protecting the glasses in our cabinets, we will not enjoy them, or use them for their intended purpose. And if we play catch with a glass indoors, our time to enjoy it will likely be short.

In a training for small congregations last month, Evin Carvill-Ziemer reminded us that how we manage the small things is, in some ways, more important than how we respond to the big stuff. The little things are practice for how we will approach bigger problems, and revealing of what we value and where we put our intentions. How well folks treat each other in parking lots and reaching for olive oil is endemic of where we are as a broader culture in terms of

2 Mark Epstein's book, *Thoughts Without a Thinker*, p.80-81

wholeness. This isn't a one to one, cause and effect kind of thing, but more like looking at lots of symptoms to try and diagnose health. When someone is super stressed and their resilience is burned out, they are much less likely to respond well to challenges. When a health care system is stretched to meet the needs of a population and a new virus comes to town, things are hard. Evin cited adrienne maree brown, who in her work for social justice has said that making lots of small shifts, small changes, allows for a big shift, like tremors before an earthquake.³ The small stuff matters, not because we need to hold on tightly to small things, but rather because each small moment of choice or challenge is an opportunity to practice a thoughtful response.

If you have more time alone with your thoughts this week that you normally would, I invite you to practice little ways of letting go of attachment to things that you cannot control, especially around this pandemic. Is there a path through this that says neither, I must immediately change all the things this pandemic has uncovered, nor everything is fine and I don't need to change anything? I am sure there is. What can we learn standing in that middle? And how might that deepen our own spiritual practice and calling? Remember Emily Dickinson's famous words, "The only commandment I ever obeyed — 'Consider the Lilies.'"⁴

So may it be. Amen.

3 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQDc_7aBZAU

4 Emily Dickinson – journal