

"NO WONDER-NO WORRIES"
DIVERSITY SUNDAY
June 10, 2018
Matthew 6:24-35 NRSV

"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?"

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. 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?"

Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

"So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

When Auggie Pullman wakes up on the first day of school, he might well say into the mirror this last line of this scripture passage: "Today's trouble is enough for today." Looking around for his NASA space helmet that he wears so no one can see his deformed face and head, he is dreading what the other kids at school will say about him. He is different. He is not like them. He is worried about what the mean kids, the bullies, will say and do to him. Never having been at

a school before, he can only imagine and worry about what this morning will be like, and the thought of it makes him want to crawl back into bed and draw the covers up over his face and head.

"Today's trouble is enough for today. Why do you worry so?" Physician and author Lewis Thomas writes, "We are, perhaps, uniquely among the earth's creatures, the worrying animal." Auggie worries. Auggie is ashamed of how God made him. Auggie asks for courage to face his trial and Spirit whispers to him:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.

Auggie has to go to school. He has to step out of his cocooned, protected innocence and enter the real world. There are bullies out there. There are people who will in horror turn away from him. They often do. There are people out in the world who will stare at him until he looks down and averts their gaze. Auggie has become an astute observer of the human personality by examining the shoes people wear. He can tell aggressive people by their boots, rigid people by their black or brown lifeless shoes, and people who are interesting by the artwork that adorns their sandals. I wonder what he would say about me? Would I accept him or force him to avert my stares and look instead at my shoes? Would I turn away? Would I describe him later as August Pullman—Auggie- or as the "boy with the scarred face?"

We do that, don't we? We describe people by their diversity markers. We say, "you know, the gay couple down the street," or "that black guy who comes to visit on occasion," "the woman in the wheelchair," or "the old man whose wife died last year." Yes, we notice diversity. We identify others with our diversity markers. We get impersonal with them so we don't have to face our prejudices head-on.

I remember being the only kindergartner who didn't get to slide down the pole at the firehouse because I was too short. I was bullied and made fun of for weeks over that one. I was the girl who was called, "four eyes" due to wearing glasses early in life. We were "those Lutherans" in our neighborhood of all Catholics and those "latchkey kids" when our mother went to work. My school principal greeted me one day by saying, "Oh, yeah, you're the kid with asthma." Yes, sir, that's what defines me alright, the thing that frequently keeps me in the nurse's office and off the playground. Thanks a lot. And what's my name, Mr. Remer?"

Yes, I can think back on all my diversity stories, but in reality, let's face it: I am white. I am able. I am educated. I am Christian. I am hetero, and I am married to a white man. I am buying a home and living there. I am employed. And I have friends. I am the almost-majority, the only demographic keeping me from full-on majority power being my gender.

I can buy my wedding cake anywhere.

I can walk around my neighborhood with my dog and no one questions what I am doing there.

I can drive my car through the metro area and not be pulled over for "driving while black." And yes, let me assure you, it does happen.

I can walk into a store, browse around the merchandise, and not be videotaped and profiled as "someone likely to shoplift."

Chris Rock, the black comedian, recently commented: "You think you're not a racist? I'll tell you what—I have a lot of money, I've made a lot of money. I'll give you *all* my money, if you'll just trade places with me. You be black in America and I'll be white. Will you do that? Because I'll trade you *right now*."

I kind of took offense at his questioning whether I am racist because I don't think of myself that way and maybe you don't either. I had to think about that one. But honestly, I wouldn't trade. I have black and brown friends and colleagues, and I think everyone should be regarded for who they are, not for the color of their skin, I wouldn't trade places with him for all the money in the world. I would be a liar if I said I wasn't relieved that I am white.

And straight. My gay and lesbian and transgender friends and colleagues struggle with perceptions and powerlessness that I can only read about and hear about. As an ally, I can stand with the LGBTQ community, but I am privileged as one who stands outside, rather than inside, that circle.

I am able. Sure, I have my scars and my fusions, my stiff muscles and my constant struggle to remain healthy, but I can for the most part do what I want to do, go where I want to go, use my legs and my arms, my eyes and my ears, my voice and my mind. I am privileged. I can only stand *with* those disabled persons who live in the world that favors and caters to the abled.

Jason Trembly plays the part of real-life Auggie Pullman in tonight's film, "Wonder" about a boy born with severe facial deformities and breathing disabilities. He said that to prepare for the role, he watched in the makeup room mirror two hours each day as the prosthetics were put onto his face. He imagined what it would be like for him if they were never going to be taken off. His overarching learning from playing Auggie was that "kindness wins." A simple statement for Diversity Sunday.

Jesus asks his disciples, "Why do you worry so much?" We frequently think we're the highest life form, yet, he reminds them, "Look at the birds in the air, they don't worry. They don't stockpile. They are provided for by God." And then he recalls the flowers out in the fields, beautiful as they are with their imperfections, with their anomalies, whether they have all their leaves or too many petals, holes in them from insects or swayed by the wind. They are all lovely and valued; they are all perfect in God's eyes.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our wrongs
As we forgive those who wrong us.

Auggie is bullied at school. Day after day, his locker and his classroom seats are peppered with caricatures and cartoons making fun of his face and voice. He is excluded from conversations and he sits alone in the lunchroom while the other kids whisper and laugh about him at nearby tables. He's only 10 years old, but he's endured the pain of 27 surgeries. He's only in 5th grade, but he already has a lifetime of education under his belt. His favorite day of the year is Halloween., when he can don a mask and body-covering and be just like everyone else. Think about that for a minute. For how many years did you dress up for Halloween like a scary figure with a sunken face, scarred and evil-looking? Auggie Pullman does not have to dress up at all to be and feel like that, to be treated as if he were a monster or a devil or a lower life form.

In a particularly telling exchange at home, Auggie asks his mother, "Why am I ugly?" His mother responds that he is *not* ugly, and he replies, "You *have* to say that because you're my mother!" Julia Roberts plays his mother. She screws up her face in Julia Roberts style, if you can picture that and, looking him squarely and lovingly into his eyes, asks him, "What? It doesn't count because I am your mother?"

Spirit whispers more love notes into our ears, "Why do your worry? What does it add to your life?"

For thine is the kingdom
And the power

And the glory forever

It is no accident that Jesus has just taught his followers the Lord's Prayer. He knows his time on earth with them is short, and that they will need it when he is gone. We'll need it now that he is gone, for we worry, we worry all the time. Literally, the root of the word, worry, means "to strangle." Chances are when you are deeply worried about something, this is exactly what it feels like, like someone or something is all but choking the air right out of your lungs.

Matthew's Jesus repeats his command three times within the short passage. "Do not worry," he tells the faithful. You know what good that does when you are churning something in your mind day and night. Someone comes along and sings, "don't worry, be happy!" and you want to choke the stuffing right out of *them*.

"Oh, *sure, thanks,*" you say sarcastically to the well-meaning optimist, "your saying so makes it all go away. Whew! I was worried, but now I can let that all go! Your magic spell has worked!" Hardly.

The worry goes on, intensifies even, because someone had underlined it. We are like Auggie. We are searching around for our NASA space helmet and suit so that nothing can get to us; nothing can get in through our defenses.

At Auggie's school, in one of his classes the lesson is about social precepts, instructions on how to live an honorable and honoring life. One of them says, "Be kind, for people are fighting hard battles,

and if you really want to see who they are, all you have to do is just look, really look." If there is a common theme of goodness in this story, the counter theme to bullying, it is this concept of kindness, of being kind. A particularly wonderful girl in the film, Summer, is one that intrinsically understands kindness—she lives it, she oozes it.

Summer is African American. She has seen her share of bullying, of being the left out one from the "in" crowd. The biggest bully of them all, Julian, is a rich kid from a pair of snobby, bigoted parents. You sort of get the impression that he has no choice in the matter but to grow up and be just like them. But goodness and kindness, the Jesus way of things, has its say and eventually also wins the day for Auggie, for Summer, for Jack Will, for the whole school. Summer reminds them all, "when given the choice between being right and being kind, choose kind."

This pretty well sums up the entire Christian faith, doesn't it? Be kind. Be humble. Put your faith in God, and don't worry, Jesus will have your back. Be like the wildflower in the meadow. No one will *tend* you. No one will come along and water you. No one will keep the bugs off of you, and yet, you are beautiful just as you are and as you shall be. God will care for you as one among the many. So why worry?

Auggie has to conquer his fear if he is to enter the world.

Summer has to conquer her fear if she is to stand up for her rightful place in the world.

Jack Will has to decide what he values if he is going to survive Julian's meanness.

And Julian has to decide who he wants to be as he grows older if he is going to survive his parents and their prejudices.

Even the lovable Wookie, Chewbacca, has a part to play in Auggie's transformation from victim to hero, from worry-wart to champion.

This is an important film. Classes all over America have recessed to the movie theatre to play it for their impressionable students from grades 1 through 12. Bullying is real. Racism is real. Sexism is real. Classism is real. Homophobia is real. Ableism is real. *We should* worry. It is not enough to declare ourselves Open and Affirming and Accessible to All. We must live into our creeds, confront our own prejudices, find our own Auggies and our own Summers, and then look them square in the eyes with kindness, compassion, acceptance, and love. It's really the only way that we have the right to call ourselves "Christian."

May It Be So.