

**Haydenville Congregational Church**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian**  
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**Isaiah 49:8-16, Matthew 6:24-34**

**“Go With the Flow”**

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*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

When a swimmer pushes herself in a meet and breaks her own record;

When a violinist masters an intricate musical passage;

When a chess player is deeply focused on every move he and his opponent are making;

When a student of yoga finds that she can assume and hold a new pose;

When a rock climber is carefully making his way up the face of a cliff;

When a mother is reading to her daughter curled up in her lap....

When a person’s attention is completely absorbed by an activity and she or he reports feelings of enjoyment, concentration, and deep involvement, and a sense of time and all emotional problems seem to disappear, that person is in a state of consciousness called *flow*—according Dr. Csikszentmihalyi, Professor of Psychology at the University of Chicago.

Everyone experiences *flow* from time to time, says Professor Csikszentmihalyi, and will recognize its characteristics: people feel strong, alert, in effortless control, unselfconscious, and as if they were performing at the peak of their abilities.

When a person experiences *flow*, there is an exhilarating feeling of transcendence and of breaking out of the boundaries of identity.

In his pathbreaking book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*,

Dr. Csikszentmihalyi discusses how this pleasurable state can be controlled, created, and not left to chance. Apparently, the key is to set challenges for ourselves—tasks that are neither too difficult nor too simple for our abilities. In his extensive research, Dr. Csikszentmihalyi studied how thousands of individuals spent their time and moved through their daily activities. His research led him to conclude that we often walk through our days unaware and out of touch with our emotional lives. Our inattention causes us to bounce repeatedly between two extremes: we live filled with the anxiety and pressures of our work and daily obligations and, during our leisure or free time, we fall into a state of passive boredom.

Dr. Csikszentmihalyi has written a number of books on *flow*—showing through his research how we can enhance our work, our play and our lives overall. *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* is another Csikszentmihalyi classic, as is his book *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*.

Professor Csikszentmihalyi’s research and writing have relevance for us today as we consider the passage from the Gospel of Matthew in which Jesus tells his followers firmly and directly: **do not worry**.

*‘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. ... can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ... do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.*

What is fascinating to me about Matthew 6:24-34, the passage for today, is the word “worry”—found six times in this short reading. Clearly, the central theme in Jesus’ message is the idea of worry or anxiety and that term, in the original Greek, means “split attention” or “divided concern.” I love that description of worry—that our attention is split, divided between what we are trying to do and what is consuming our thoughts.

I love that image of worry because I relate to it so completely. I think the term in Greek conveying “split attention” and “divided concern” is the right explanation for what worry does to our minds. When we are worried about something, we are present but not fully present in what we are doing at any given moment; we are

engaged in an activity but we are not completely there. We can be talking about something but part of us is elsewhere thinking about another concern.

When I was a child cameras were far less sophisticated than they are today. Every once in a while, when one of those old cameras came to the end of the film in the barrel, the camera would take two photographs and superimpose them on top of each other in one picture. The picture would come out as a **double exposure**. So you'd see there in one picture Andrea blowing out the candles on her birthday cake and superimposed on that image sister Gina sitting in a tree in the backyard. Two photographs in one picture. Neither was useable.

Worry is like the picture that is double exposed....and the Greek word for worry captures that meaning. When worried, half of our brain is doing what we are actually doing—working, caring for children, shoveling, balancing our checkbook, buying groceries. And half of our brain is going over and over our worry....what should I do about this problem? Why did this happen? How should I respond? How do I solve this? We are partially present to whatever we are doing and partially not. We carry on with the tasks of daily life but we are only partly there. It's like double exposure—two pictures in one frame.

The Greek word for worry is an accurate description of what happens when we are anxious—worry causes us to have split attention. And in today's reading Jesus is saying: don't do that. Attend fully to the task at hand and give more of your cares to God. Do not spend your life worrying.

Professor Csikszentmihalyi would agree with Jesus. Maybe he would not use Jesus' language or images—his books don't talk a great deal about faith (although he DOES talk some about meditation practices and prayer)—but he would agree with Jesus and his research substantiates what Jesus is advising.

Dr. Csikszentmihalyi believes that each day we alternate between being anxious and being bored, and as we bounce between these two extremes we prevent ourselves from having *flow* experiences. The good professor believes we must challenge ourselves with tasks requiring a high degree of skill and commitment—tasks that are not too hard for our abilities but also not too easy. Instead of watching television he says, play the piano. Dr. Csikszentmihalyi believes we must create opportunities for activities and interactions that require (actually demand!) complete engagement. And Jesus would concur.

Jesus does not want us walking around half present, half there, half engaged. Jesus wants us to be fully engaged in the work of creating the kingdom on earth, being close and connected to God, doing God's work in this beautiful but broken world. Jesus does not want a partial Andrea or a partial Carol or a partial Donna stumbling in a distracted fashion through life. Jesus wants us fully awake—no sleep-walking disciples among his followers.

And so we need to be brave enough to take on tasks each day that demand our full attention and then give ourselves completely to those activities. Whether it is gardening, reading the Bible, playing with children, practicing guitar, dancing the Tango, or making a soufflé, we need to focus completely on what we are doing, creating, engaged in and let the experience of *flow* transport us out of ourselves, away from our worries, into a time out of time. For then we are living fully and fully living. We don't want to be half present zombies. Jesus does not want us to be half present zombies. And Dr. Csikszentmihalyi says it is possible to create a life, day after day after day in which we avoid being half present zombies—a life not defined by the daily bouncing between anxiety and boredom, but a life characterized by challenge, peak experiences, intense presence in the moment, and *flow*.

Dr. Csikszentmihalyi's books are full of recommendations about how to live a life that minimizes anxiety and boredom and maximizes *flow* experiences. And his suggestions are excellent. But as people of faith, we have an ace in our pockets....we are experts on how to decrease worry and increase engagement with life. **We can turn to God.** We can, with assurance, turn to God and know that God will show up and calm our pounding hearts, relax our furrowed brows, refocus our worried minds, and quiet our racing thoughts.

We are people of faith. And although we may also employ many of Dr. Csikszentmihalyi's suggestions, we hold the key to a life of less anxiety and more flow....it involves resting in God's loving embrace and recognizing that God loves us and there is NOTHING we will face in this lifetime that we will go through alone. God will counsel and comfort, guide and direct, love and support, and absorb all the anxiety we lift to God.

*Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* has many good recommendations for reducing the level of worry in our lives and increasing flow experiences. But the Bible has even more.

Read any passage about God's unending love for us and your level of anxiety will diminish. Study the words in the Hebrews Scriptures and in the New Testament where we are told over and over again how God loves us and will not leave us and your worries will seem small and manageable.

Today we heard these beautiful words from the Book of Isaiah...

*Thus says the Lord:  
In a time of favor I have answered you,  
on a day of salvation I have helped you...  
Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;  
break forth, O mountains, into singing!  
For the Lord has comforted his people,  
and will have compassion on his suffering ones.  
...I will not forget you.  
See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.*

One of my favorite images in the whole Bible... God has inscribed each one of us on the palms of God's hands.

We are so cherished by God, so dear to God's heart, that our names are written on God's hands.

It is like God tattooed Annie and Marcelle, Donique and Ross, Shirley and Doug, Fred and Deb, Gloria and Rick on God's very hands.

If my name is tattooed on God's hands, should I be endlessly carrying around worries about my day, my week, my future, my anything?

If my name is tattooed on God's hands, should I be filled with anxiety? No...

*For the Lord has comforted his people,  
and will have compassion on his suffering ones.  
...I will not forget you.  
See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.*

Our names are inscribed on God's hands... so says the prophet Isaiah, and I believe it is true. You and I can let go of worry and give ourselves fully to the task of living, to the pursuit of peak experiences, to the complete engagement with the activity before us. We can rest in God's loving embrace. We can let go and let God.

I think two experts, Dr. Csikszentmihalyi of Chicago and Jesus of Nazareth, would agree: do not spend your life worrying. Instead, go with the *flow*.

Amen.