Jesus takes his followers up to the mountain,
mountains of course are ancient code for a place to find God and wisdom.

He takes his followers up to the mountain, sits down, and begins to teach.
In the second chapter of this teaching, this Sermon on the Mount,
after he has begun to teach them how to love their enemies,
and how to give alms, and how to fast, and how to pray,
right after he teaches that “no one can serve two masters,”
you have to pick—God or money—
right after that he teaches,

“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?”

These disciples, especially the core twelve, have quit their jobs to follow him.
They’ve left home and family and storehouse
and quite possibly steady meals and sturdy new shoes behind.
He says to these disciples,

“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?”

I bet those disciples did worry.

We do too.

Some of us here know what it is to worry
about where our next meal is coming from.

Some of us here know what it is to worry
about whether we’re going to make rent or our mortgage
or maybe even where we will sleep tonight.

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month
and I know that some of us here know what it is to worry
about who it is pulling in the driveway,
coming through the door, or catching us all alone
and what it means to worry about what state that person might be in.
Some of us here know what it is to worry
about our bodies, our health,
or the bodies of our loved ones, the health of our loved ones.

I wonder if the disciples felt guilty when they heard, “do not worry.”
I wonder if they felt resentful or angry.
I wonder if they felt confusion. “Do not worry.”

I bet they did worry. And we do too.
I don’t think hiding our worries
or denying our worries
or focusing on our worries
or worrying about our worries actually helps us.

But I do think noticing them does.
I think Jesus had to tell them not to worry,
because they were. Because we do.

When we notice our worries though,
we can take a little step back from them
and remember that we are more than those worries,
we can begin to loosen their grip on us,
and we can let those natural worries and fears serve us
instead of being controlled by them.
For, it’s not that food or drink or clothing are not important.

It’s that for one thing you can’t guarantee them.
You can pay your mortgage faithfully
and after something like the housing crash still lose your house.
You can try to please everyone and find yourself without any friends.
You can work out everyday and still experience health problems.
You can have a good job and still not be able to feed your family.
You can be a law abiding citizen and still find yourself in jail.
You can be a teen sent to a great, expensive, private school
and still develop a drug problem or experience violence.

There is nothing we can do to guarantee that harm will not befall us.
What we can do is choose how we will react to stress and harm and worry.

It starts by loosening our grip on our expectations from this life.
Jesus teaches his followers to “seek first the kingdom of God.”
This term, “the kingdom of God”
or its frequent substitute “the kingdom of heaven”
is like a continuous drumbeat in Matthew.

To all but the thoroughly churched
this phrase, “the kingdom of God” can sound odd and antiquated.
It’s code in Matthew though for following the way of Jesus and for tapping into the way Jesus would have us live:
loving enemies,
practicing nonviolent resistance to wrongs,
and offering forgiveness and compassion.

It’s not just a method of punching your ticket for the afterlife, either.
The repercussions of living this way may well be felt in the next life, but living in that compassionate, peaceful, and just reign of God can be experienced in this life now.

When I hear Jesus teaching not to store up treasures on earth as he does earlier in this chapter, I don’t hear him teaching that we have to give up all that we own --that we should stop eating and drinking and buying needed shoes.

I hear instead, that chasing after even those things we consider most essential will lead us down a wrong path if we chase after those things at any cost.

In other words, do not worry about what it costs to get out of an abusive relationship.
Do not worry about what it costs to stand-up to sexist and anti-muslim bigotry.

Do not worry about what it costs to call out white privilege and end racism.

Do not worry about the costs of creating a Safe Church environment.

Do not worry about what it costs to follow Jesus.

Do not worry because the cost of NOT doing those things is too high for you and for others.

Seek first the “kingdom of God.”

Seek first right-relationships, peace with justice, wholeness and shalom, where there is respect for everyone involved and no-one is abused or treated like an object.

Worrying does not add a single hour of life but striving first for the kingdom of God is what it takes to “take hold of the life that really is life.”

In this age, when advertisements pull at us from every corner reminding us to tighten our grip on our food, drink, clothing, money, appearance, and status
we can find freedom
in refusing to worry about those things or anything else.

Now Timothy is an interesting book.
It says some things I disagree
with strongly like slaves should obey their masters
and women not to presume authority over any man
by for example, speaking in front of a mix-gendered crowd
as I am doing right here and now.

I feel these things are antithetical to other teachings within the book of Timothy
and to the teachings of Jesus,
who sought to empower the powerless
regardless of who they were.

Parts of this book try to keep in place the system of dominance
by which certain free-men unjustly controlled others.
If the writer of Timothy feels the need to protect this system,
it is probably because it is already being challenged and toppled
by Jesus followers.

These followers must have understood that to keep in place the status quo
was not acceptable no matter what it cost them.
Maybe they had tasted of “that life that really is life”
and there was no going back for them.
Indeed the call to that kind of freedom escapes from other parts of this letter as if it can’t help itself but truly bear witness to the teachings of Jesus from the gospels. I think those kind of luring calls to a life of freedom come out in texts like the one chosen for this year’s giving campaign.

In case you don’t have the rest of the book of Timothy in front of you, the “they” this passage is referring to is those who are rich in the present day.

The rich are to “do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.”

The text calls out the rich in their special responsibility to share from their abundance But I believe it is a call for all of us, those rich and those not so rich to taste of the freedom of seeking the kingdom of God by selfless service and practicing generosity.

That I believe is one example of living simply.

I hear in this Timothy text as in the Matthew passage a call to
not be controlled by our worries or our fears
but to seek first the kingdom of God,
in order to take hold of the life that really is life.

And, when we take hold of this life,
then our giving can come from a place of compassion,
Instead of a place of obligation.

Because serving obligation can bring about good
but it will not allow you to take hold of the life that really is life
and it is not seeking first the kingdom of God.

Serving obligation
is serving the ego voice in our heads that worries about our status.

When we are serving the kingdom of God
instead of serving our worry or our obligation
then we can be free to share our money, talent, and time
with a generosity of spirit.

When we are serving the kingdom of God
Instead of serving our own worry
We can stop trampling others and trampling our environment
Trying to get our needs met first at any cost
and we can start to see creative solutions
Each day this week I spent some time on my bike instead of in a car.

I’m not riding my bike out of a sense of obligation
Although some days it does require discipline.
I’m riding my bike out of a sense of freedom.
I love the freedom that comes with being able to get where I want to go without car keys or a gallon of gas or a seat belt in the fresh air,
  making my admittedly short commute an exercise practice.
To be able to bike commute in Elgin
I have to let go of worries.
I have to let go of worry about drivers harrassing me, which happens.
I have to let go of worry about people thinking I’m a little odd, which happens.
I have to let go of ...

But I’m doing it because it makes me feel free and also powerful,
  Like I am doing my part to live simply
  And to use only the resources I need
  And to find the stress relief, physical well-being,
  And reconnection with the world around me I need.

I know I’m not alone.
I’m pretty sure there are at least half a dozen of us in this congregation.
You folks know what I’m talking about.
And I also know that a bike commute isn’t an option for everyone
but how do you taste of that life that really is life?

What is the practice of living simply that gives you freedom?

How do you notice your worries and find release from them
by striving first for the kingdom of God?

Because indeed, I believe
‘Tis a gift to be simple, ‘tis a gift to be free.
‘Tis a gift to live in the valley of love and delight,
Tasting of the life that really is life.

May it be so. Amen.