



**The Eighth Sunday after Epiphany
Matthew 6:25-33
The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker**

Worry Not

Biblical commentator Herbert O' Driscoll has said "We all know that there is not a single pleasure, given to us as a gift of God, which we cannot with a little effort turn into a neurosis!"

I think Jesus' words this morning speak to a world that is utterly addicted to anxiety. It is almost as if we feel that if we are not worried or anxious, we're not paying attention. "The world is mess!" "The end is near!" "Society is disintegrating!" "Kids today have lost their way!" "My favorite restaurant's closed!" "I can't find an outfit for tonight's party!" "My computer crashed!"

It doesn't seem to matter whether the problem is truly grave or if it's just a temporary setback in our lives, it appears our fallback response is often anxiety, worry, or fear. Our whole orientation seems to be to show our "connectedness" by demonstrating worry.

In these last several weeks we have been hearing the words of Jesus as he has delivered what we call the Sermon on the Mount. And each week we have heard Jesus exhort us into a way of life that many over the years have taken as just one more heavy prescription from God that feels like a burden on our lives.

But indeed, as we have also said, Jesus intent is in fact to free us from the many ways which we have made loving God and one another a heavy burden of perfected behaviors.

Jesus wraps warm flesh and blood around God's law and demonstrates continually that God's deepest promises to us were about mercy, compassion...and maybe most of all

about freedom from anxiety...”Do not be afraid”...he says it over and over and over again.

“I tell you,” he says to us again today, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?...and can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?”

Modern science has taught us that in fact worry can do just the opposite and shorten our life spans.

And of course we know that Jesus was not advocating with his words that we not work to clothe and feed ourselves and others, he tells us plainly, “Indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.”

Material possessions and food are gifts from God as well and they are to be rejoiced in and as well as shared with others. It is when these things become idols that humanity’s neurosis begins and anxiety and worry seem to become a philosophy of life.

We miss so many of the gifts God bestows us each and everyday because we dwell in the shadows of what it is not yet. C.S. Lewis referred to this propensity as living in the Shadow lands. We scarcely enjoy what is before us because we are constantly buried in worry and seeking after that “next” thing we think will bring us happiness.

Now, God most certainly calls us to be concerned for the state of the world we live in. This is not a simplistic “don’t worry, be happy” exhortation. What this incredible teaching calls us to is an not an escape from the ways the world falls short, but instead to a deep abiding trust that God’s providence.

It is all too easy for us to forget that God’s grace and God’s power will always have the last word and see us through all of the ways that life can be painful and punishing as well as the ways that life can just feel empty and pointless.

But Jesus’ words call us into the profound joy of being present in each and every moment of our lives. Whether they feel like good times or bad times. An awareness and appreciation of the present moment is a rare commodity in modern life.

But there is an antidote for this problem...I once heard it said, “Put God first and you’ll get the world thrown in.”

What this phrase offers I think is a reminder of a kind of attentive presence to God at work in the world in all things. Seeking God’s presence in all things and participating in God’s promises of reconciliation for world---this is what makes the kingdom come and God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

And these are not simply empty words on paper. I remember so clearly the first time I experienced the truth of the promise in Jesus' words in a way that has never left me since.

It was in my first year of seminary when I found out my mother was dying of cancer. We were told it was already too far advanced for treatment and that in fact we most likely only had a few weeks left with her.

These were the same few weeks that coincided with my end of year term papers and finals.

My mother was adamant about me not coming home until I was finished, but I could not figure out for the life of me how I was supposed to function in those circumstances.

But my very wise and wonderful spiritual director pointed me to these words from Jesus and encouraged me to surrender my fears to God and trust that God would see me through this.

She did not promise me that God would write my papers or take my finals for me---this was no magic formula. And she certainly did not promise that God would remove my mother's cancer. The papers and finals were a fact and my mother's cancer was a fact.

But, you see, God's Truth, God's love and God's promise of new life out of death are far stronger Truths than any of the pain and sadness of any of our present circumstances.

So, I surrendered my fear, grief and anxieties to God and my friends I promise you I was transformed!

It was not magic, this surrender did not *remove* my grief and sadness, but fear and anxiety were put to flight, and I was able to see that even in the midst of death there was still so much of life to be celebrated, that *worry* would only rob my ability to see that even in the grip of the unhappiest event of my life, *JOY* was my constant companion.

This event could have easily felt like a horrible and unfair disruption of my life just when I was following my deepest desire. But because someone encouraged me to truly trust that God was in this mix---an event that could have taken me away from becoming a priest in fact became one of the most abiding and tender elements of my formation and opened my eyes to see God's care and presence every step of the way.

My experience was simply a flesh and blood example of one of Christ's deepest truths; a truth that calls us into profound understanding of all that God does for us even in the midst of the ways life is uncompromising and hard.

This is the way that Christ's peace and joy become the foundation of our lives---a foundation that that cannot be shaken either by simple disappointment or even by the heartbreak or our deepest grief.

God calls us out of the shadow lands of worry for tomorrow with the promise that Christ's light can find us even in the darkest of places.

Seeking God first is what brings order to our chaos. It is the key that unlocks the mystery of time and gives us the gift of the present moment.

For me no one captures the profound beauty of this gift than Christian mystic Jean-Pierre de Caussade. He says:

"The events of every moment are stamped with the will of God. How holy is his name! How right it is to bless it and to treat it as something that sanctifies all it touches. Can we see anything which carries this name without showing it infinite love? It is a divine warmth from heaven and gives us a ceaseless increase of Grace. The present moment is the kingdom of heaven that penetrates the soul... All that comes from (God) (even the smallest moment) is most excellent and bears the imprint of its origin."

And so to these words and to Jesus' exhortation I will add a little popular wisdom from our friend Mark Twain. He says that worrying about something that hasn't happened yet, is like paying interest on a debt we never owed. Who among here cannot appreciate that simple wisdom!

Jesus very life shows us the fruits of living moment to moment without anxiety and what means to embrace peace in an embattled world. So do not worry about tomorrow my friends---with God at the center of our lives, tomorrow will indeed take care of itself. So I want to finish with the words from the collect which we heard earlier in our worship, it is in fact one of my favorites. Maybe now it will ring with deeper truth:

Most loving Father, whose will it is for us to give thanks for all things, to fear nothing but the loss of you, and to cast all our care on you who care for us: Preserve us from faithless fears and worldly anxieties, that no clouds of this mortal life may hide from us the light of that love which is immortal, and which you have manifested to us in your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

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