Sermon by Peter Strimer

St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, Seattle

August 7, 2016

True Confessions. I am a worrier. Many people who know me find that hard to believe since I usually maintain a pretty upbeat attitude toward life. But my shadow side is full of worry.

I even keep a set of anti-worry sayings on my dresser to help me dispel the concerns as the day begins. There is actually a pretty thriving business in anti-worry merchandise and I have my share. Mugs, wall plaques greeting cards. A few of my favorites include:

* Worry is a waste of the imagination
* A Swedish Proverb - Worry often gives a small thing a big shadow.
* Worry is fear's extravagance. It extracts interest on trouble before it comes due.
* Worry is wasting today's time to clutter up tomorrow's opportunities with yesterday's troubles.
* And finally, A Rumi saying on a greeting card – Be Empty of Worrying; think of who created thought. Why do you stay in prison when the door is so wide open?

Are you a worrier too? We all are on some level. And it really doesn’t pay.

In his book *The End of Stress* Don Goeway reports on a study on worry. It turns out that 85 percent of what subjects worried about never happened, and with the 15 percent that did happen, 79 percent of subjects discovered either they could handle the difficulty better than expected, or the difficulty taught them a lesson worth learning. This means that 97 percent of what you worry over is not much more than a fearful mind punishing you with exaggerations and misperceptions.

As Montaigne said over 500 years ago, “My life has been filled with terrible misfortune; most of which never happened.

Yet there it is seemingly unavoidable like a toothache. Worry constantly drains the energy God gives us to face daily problems and to fulfill our many responsibilities.

One writer offered this definition of worry: “It is a small trickle of fear that meanders through the mind until it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained.”

The word worry itself comes from an old English word meaning “to choke or strangle.” And of course, that’s exactly what worry does to your well-being, your productivity, your happiness. It so often is a self-defeating waste of time.

Now I don’t think that we are in danger of losing our souls simply through worry. God actually doesn’t need our protection and loves us unconditionally no matter how much we sweat the details. It is just that we miss out on so much when we are caught up in worry. We miss seeing the signs of the Kingdom of God that are all around us.

That is what Jesus is teaching us in today’s gospel – “Do not be afraid little flock for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

Last week we had Jesus’ teaching on greed and this week it is his lesson on worry. These two are twin sisters with the same parent - fear. We get greedy because we are afraid so we seek more – more control, more possessions, more of everything. And then when we can’t get enough to banish our fear, we worry.

The good thing is Jesus knows this about us. All of us. Certainly his own disciples. Just remember there would be no need for these stories and parables here in the middle of Luke if worry and greed were not part and parcel of being human.

You remember where we are in this gospel

On the road to Jerusalem

Faithful disciples marching on Jerusalem

And Jesus is giving us our walking orders and a set of warnings and in this particular gospel a true pep talk for the journey. Our journey. This teaching is just as much for us as for his followers 2000 years ago.

We worship Jesus Christ, but he didn’t worship himself. Instead everything about his ministry pointed to the Kingdom of God. Every teaching, every parable, every miracle was meant to help his followers realize that the Kingdom of God was already right here in their midst. Hatred, fear, greed and yes worry were obstacles to be overcome so that we could see clearly that the Kingdom of God had come near. That was the point of each of the teachings we have explored these past four weeks and is certainly the point of our Gospel today.

The part of his extended sermon that is today’s gospel is not one you take down in your lined notebook, pen in hand. Instead it is pure poetry with beautiful imagery woven together to send our spirit soaring leaving fear and worry behind.

“Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them.”

“Consider the lilies, 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, how much more will he clothe you.”

And then that final closing powerful statement so simple on the surface but so challenging in practice: “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”

Did you hear that? Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

I think unless we listen carefully most of us reverse it. We think that we lead with our heart – loving God, loving family, loving country, loving one another. But – No - we lead with our treasure. Where we physically, materially, psychically invest ourselves our poor hearts are condemned to follow.

Jesus in this sermon is teaching tough lessons with beautiful language in this admonition to his followers.

What Jesus is calling us to is a discipline of joy. To take upon ourselves a spiritual practice of open heartedness and commitment to put our money where our mouth is, or in this case to put our actions where we hope our heart will follow.

Have we had some worried times at St. Stephen’s? Yes. Worries about lost members, loved ones who have died or moved on. Worries about money, how to keep our excellent staff, keep up our beautiful buildings and still have the means to make a difference in the world. Worries about conflict, about a lack of harmony.

But, remember, worry is a waste of the imagination.

Worry is fear's extravagance.

Worry is wasting today's time to clutter up tomorrow's opportunities with yesterday's troubles.

Instead of pooling our worries, let us in these days ahead pool our faith so we can see more clearly the Kingdom of God in our midst.

I have really enjoyed these past five weeks with you. We have dug deeply into a very important portion of Luke’s gospel to learn what Jesus is teaching us, his present day disciples, as we walk our own challenging path with him to Jerusalem.

We have learned that one thing is needful – faith in God.

We have seen how important constant prayer is to keeping us faithful to the journey. We have learned how greed and worry can knock us off that path. And we have learned once again about God’s unfailing, unconditional love for us.

God does not need our protection. God does not need our success. God’s only desire for us is a life of prayerful faithfulness free from greed and worry.

“Do not be afraid little flock for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.