

“Do not worry about your life...”
A Sermon for Vespers with a Free Range Pastor
Sunday, November 25, 2018
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Matthew 6:24-34

“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

“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.”
Matthew 6:24-34

Will you pray with me. Worry releasing God, you give us a hard and challenging task today – to stop worrying. Remind us that all worrying does is make ruts in our lives that throw us off track. Teach us how to follow paths that leave worrying behind and lead us not into trouble and anxiety but into the confident assurance that you will be making the journey with us, no matter what happens. Amen.

“One day at a time.” I wish I had a nickel for every time I’ve said that to someone, or someone has said it to me. “One day at a time. That’s all we can do, take it one day at a time.” Particularly in *hard* times – made hard because of economic difficulties, like losing one’s job; made hard because of physical challenges – a new cancer diagnosis, or a stroke or two strokes, or a debilitating long term illness; made hard because of an addiction – to alcohol or other drugs; made hard because of relationship problems – a broken marriage, or an estranged relationship with a teenage son or daughter; made hard because of natural disaster – like a terrible, death dealing and landscape destroying fire, like a massive earthquake or a drowning flood; made hard because of human made disaster – like war and conflicts between differing groups of people, and rampant gun violence against innocent children and adults. Every one of those worrisome situations has come into my consciousness and my conscience this year in one form or another – and probably to you, too.

In all of these instances being told to take things “one day at a time” sounds like very trite advice, but it is just about all a person can do and even that seems impossible when the problem is just too big to handle.

Let’s face it – there’s a lot to worry about these days – both within our personal lives and in the lives of millions of people around the world. Do I worry? You betcha! It’s a constant challenge everyday to stop worrying and to start doing something constructive in hard situations.

Two thousand years ago it wasn’t any different – the Scriptures tell us Jesus was paying attention to what was going on around him. And in this particular part of the Sermon on the Mount which we heard today, which actually was put together from many different occasions of

Jesus' preaching, he was focused on one thing – teaching people how to live lives *devoted to God* not to accumulating more stuff or thinking only about themselves or worrying about personal matters.

The verse that begins our text for this evening reads, "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." (Matt 6:24)

Yeah, right. Tell that to a parent today who has lost their source of income and doesn't know how they're going to pay this month's bills and feed the children. Or tell that to someone who's just been told they have a terminal illness and they need to get their affairs in order. Or tell it to someone who just received military orders to ship out to the Middle East, or our southern border or another newly designated hot spot and they have to leave a pregnant spouse at home.

There's plenty to worry about. In our passage for this evening from Matthew the word worry or worrying pops up six times in eleven verses. What do you do when someone keeps saying, "Stop worrying. Stop worrying. Stop worrying." You keep on worrying. I do....

Do you know the derivation of the word "worry"? In Greek, the word is *mer-im-NAH-o*. It comes from another word *mer-ID-zo*, which means "to disunite."¹ I learned from my *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* that the word worry literally means "to constrict, to choke or to strangle."²

Worrying chokes us off from more productive actions. Worrying disunites us from the problems that lead to the worrying in the first place. Worrying leaves us too often frozen in our attempts to deal with the problems in any constructive way at all.

So what to do? Jesus makes a fine suggestion – in eleven verses Matthew tells us, it seems to me, Jesus was saying to his disciples, "Get a grip! Keep some perspective, will you? Look around you. The birds aren't worrying. The flowers aren't worrying. So why should you? If you're focused on yourself and worrying about your situation, you can't appreciate how bad anyone else's situation is. If you're counting your money and worrying about running out of it, you can't see that your neighbor doesn't have any money at all to buy groceries or oil, or a house to live in because a horrific fire has just destroyed their entire town!"

"One commentator writing about this passage says, "Jesus is inviting people into God's realm, where priorities are clear. The focus in God's realm is not how many toys people have, but where their hearts are.... The point is that when we are about God's business and operating out of God's vision for us, we have no room or need for worry. All is in God's hands, and we are assured that we can handle whatever happens, because God is in control and God's faithful people belong to each other."³

You know what I think? I don't think it's that we worry too much. It's that we don't like to give up control. I certainly don't. I want to be in complete control of my life. Don't you? But it seems to me Jesus is saying, and I paraphrase here.... "That just won't do it, folks. The more you try to be in control of your life, the more worrying you're going to do because you're not in control in the way you'd like to be. And the more worrying you do, the more you are truly not in control. You're cutting yourself off, disuniting yourself from those around you. So, stop

¹*New Strong's Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament*, p. 56, in *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, 1990.

²*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th edition, 2004, p. 1444.

³Barbara J. Essex in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 1, 2010, p. 406.

it! Stop worrying and listen to your Father, as it were. Stop worrying and listen to your heart. When you listen to your heart and stop looking into your pocketbook or your clothes closet you'll discover riches you never knew you had at your disposal. No, really," Jesus says. "Trust me on this. Trust God on this. Don't leave home without us. Leave the driving to us."

And to top it off, it seems to me Jesus is asking these questions (don't *worry*, I'll have them for you on little pieces of paper as you leave this evening): What rules your life? What gets you up in the morning? What makes your heart sing? What matters to you and why? If your answers don't include something about God or Spirit, or Something beyond yourself working in your life, you might want to think again. You're probably worrying about the wrong things if God isn't in there somewhere.

The PROscriptions to not worry and to not be afraid appear again and again in the Bible. The PREscriptions to trust God and to follow Jesus do, too. Don't worry. God IS a trustworthy guide for today and for tomorrow and the next day. Jesus is a great teacher, even for us unruly control seekers who would rather hang onto our worries like a dog with a bone than turn them over to a Higher Power.

And then there are the modern day poets who sound the necessary realities many of us just can't put into words. One of my favorites and most helpful poems is "The Peace of Wild Things" by Wendell Berry:

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

On this first Sunday after Thanksgiving Day, may we give thanks for the never-ending opportunity to rethink our priorities, to worry less and trust more, to rest in the peace of wild things.

The a quote I placed on the back of your programs by Ralph Waldo Emerson expresses this succinctly: "Finish every day and be done with it. You have done what you could; some blunders and absurdities no doubt crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day; you shall begin it serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense."

Let the people say, "Amen."