

## **What me Worry?**

***May 25, 2008 | Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Second Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 3) Year A***

### **Lectionary citations**

Isa 49:8-16a

Ps 131

1 Cor 4:1-5

Matt 6:24-34

Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him. Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.

Today's Gospel is part of Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount.

According to Matthew, this sermon was delivered to a large crowd of people drawn from a broad area. Our assumption is that these were "common folk," those who fished, farmed, and engaged in trades. By our standards they were all poor. They did not own much and a bad year could throw them into the most abject poverty, from which they might never recover. There was no "social safety net," no health insurance, nothing to come between them and the proverbial "wolf at the door." There were no charitable institutions what we would recognize and religious people did not generally see taking care of the poor as part of their calling. These were the people whom Jesus told, "not to worry."

As you might notice from my sermon title, the first person I think of when I hear the advice "don't worry" is Alfred E. Neumann, the character from "Mad Magazine." As I remember, this character never worried because he was completely oblivious to the disasters around him. He did not worry because he did not notice that anything was wrong. I don't think that this is the attitude that Jesus is encouraging us to adopt.

I come from a family of worriers, and my mother is the champion. Sayings like the Swedish Proverb “Worry often gives a small thing a big shadow,” applied completely to my family. Mom and I mainly worried about whether we had forgotten to do something. We worried about whether we had locked the door, turned off the stove, and watered the dog. Whenever I went on a long trip anywhere, I would start worrying about what I had forgotten to do and what I had forgotten to bring as soon as the car door slammed. When I was in college, one of my favorites was worrying about whether I had locked my dorm room as soon as I set off for spring break! Every once in a while, I had to “go back and check.” Of course, 99% of the time, everything was just right!

The origin of the English word “worry” is related to the Old High German *wugen*, “to strangle.” It has come to mean, “To touch or disturb something repeatedly,” or “to repeatedly change the position of by pushing or hauling.” Extended to our thinking, worrying means going over the same thoughts over and over in different combinations, without coming to any lasting decision or resolution. Worry has the unique quality of strangling sensible planning and action, and replacing them with anxiety and fear. This kind of worrying does not lead to any useful action and is usually completely pointless.

However, this is not exactly the kind of worrying that Jesus is talking about. The word that the Gospel writer uses which is translated as “worry” means, “To consider, to think about, in the sense of being preoccupied with or absorbed by.” Jesus was not saying that food and clothing are not important, but he was saying that they are not important enough to become the focus of your attention. Jesus appears to be making two major points here. First is that if we act according to the abilities that God gave us, we will be provided for today. Second, if we take care of today, tomorrow will take care of itself.

Jesus uses the birds of the air as his first example. Even a casual observation of birds shows that they very busy creatures, moving about quickly, avoiding enemies, gathering food, and seeking mates, much of the time singing loudly and beautifully. In the same way, the lilies of the field grow according to their nature, producing stem and flower in abundance during their short lives, opening and closing with the cycle of the sun. Again, the lilies are not inactive. They are very active, according to their nature. As far as the grass of the field is concerned, those of us who do the mowing know how much they can accomplish in a day! All of these live according to the nature that God has given them for the span they are assigned. They do not worry, but they sure work!

Jesus seems to be saying that if we work according to the abilities that God has given us, God will provide us with what we need to live. Of course, there are exceptions such as war and famine, but what Jesus is saying makes sense even to people in our culture. Just as God has provided each creature with its “ecological niche” where it can grow and flourish, each person is provided with a productive role in society. All we need to do is to discern what our God-given talents and abilities are and then put those abilities to useful work. A decent living will follow. This might have been easier to do in Jesus’ time, where most people worked in a clearly defined trade—carpenter, fisherman, household manager—and many followed their parent’s trade. Discerning your vocation may be more difficult today, with all the choices we have for education and relocation, and the rapid changes in the job market driven by technology, but I do not think these changes invalidate Jesus’ point.

I believe that Jesus was pointing out that if you follow the trade that comes naturally to you, the one God has given you the ability to carry out, then you can be free

from worry, from ambition, from greed, from insecurity. An honest living frees you from the burden of scheming to get ahead, to work the angles, to gamble, and cheat. Instead of consuming your life with the need to always make more and have more, an honest living frees you to enjoy life and focus on your relationships, especially your relationship with God. It gives you the time and energy to pursue what is most important in life, seeking the Kingdom of God.

Pursuing his second theme, Jesus argues that worrying about tomorrow has little benefit and great cost. Jesus clearly believed that striving to accumulate a surplus, to live tomorrow off what we save today, is harmful and misguided. Jesus had a skeptical view of the prospects for preserving today's surplus for tomorrow's want, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal." Jesus also reminded his listeners that the anticipated tomorrow might never come. I am reminded of Jesus' story of the rich man in Luke 12, who said to himself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." Of course, he died that night. To Jesus, the sensible thing to do with a surplus was to give it to those in need today, not selfishly save it for a tomorrow that might never come.

Superficially, it looks like we have taken Jesus' advice not to worry about tomorrow. One of the loudest complaints made by today's economists is that the American people do not even *try* to save for tomorrow. Instead, they spend everything they make and then mortgage their future, doing exactly the opposite of hoarding for tomorrow! We spend more and more on today's wants, well beyond simple food and clothing and hope that tomorrow will take care of itself. It seems that in a prosperous

country like the USA, where most people do not have to worry about having something to eat and something to wear, the worry that Jesus was speaking about has grown rather than withered away. As our basic needs have been met, our wants have continued to expand. We are obsessed with having the latest gadgets in the home entertainment center and kitchen, with having the most advanced and powerful vehicle to drive, with closets full of the latest fashions. We need to be constantly entertained, usually in ways that involve sitting passively and watching and listening, while we stuff junk food into our mouths.

We take on jobs that we are not suited to and do not enjoy, and force ourselves to work harder and harder for longer and longer hours to make more money to buy all these things for our families and ourselves. When we cannot earn enough to satisfy our uncontrolled wants, we can go into debt, cheat on our taxes, and even steal a little from work.

Previous generations were consumed by worrying about whether they would have food and clothing tomorrow, while recent generations worry about whether they will be able to meet today's ever expanding wants for luxuries that have become necessities. In both cases, Jesus' point is still relevant today. Making a living has a natural place in life. God has given us talents, abilities, and a world where we can use those gifts to make a decent and honorable living.

Together, how we earn our bread and how we eat our bread make up our way of living in the world. They are plenty of signs that tell us that we have settled on an appropriate way of living—we enjoy it, it builds us up rather than tears us down, and it does not consume all of our time and energy.

If your way of living does not leave you time to read the Bible, to pray, and to be in fellowship with fellow Christians on Sunday morning, there is something wrong with your way of life. If you fill your life, heart, and mind with the things of this world, then when God calls you to the Kingdom in this life and the next, you may be so absorbed and preoccupied with your needs and wants that you may never hear the call.

Focus on what you need, rather than on what you want, and you will find that God has given you abundance. Leave some room in your life, in your heart, and in your mind for God. After a while, you may find that Jesus' words start making more sense to you than the commercials you see on TV. "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Amen.

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