

WPC
Rev. Ken Sunoo
February 27, 2011
Ordination/Installation of Kurt Swihart as Elder

Don't Worry, Be Happy
Psalm 131:1-3; Matthew 6:24-34

In the late 1980's, singer Bobby McFerrin's song "Don't Worry, Be Happy" became the first *a cappella* song to reach number one on the Billboard Chart. [PLAY VIDEO].

In this song, Bobby McFerrin encourages us to adopt a simple philosophy: "Don't worry, be happy!" At first glance, it appears that he's urging us to ignore life's realities, give no mind to tomorrow, and seek instant gratification. But as I looked more closely at the lyrics, I don't think that's what the song's saying. McFerrin's not ignoring life's realities – he's simply saying that worrying about those realities doesn't help. He sings, "In every life we have some trouble, when you worry you make it double, don't worry, be happy!"

Not bad advice. It's similar to what Jesus says in today's Gospel passage: Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own.

Sounds good, except for me it's simply impossible to do. Don't worry?? You've got to be kidding. What leads to anxiety more than

forbidding it? Telling people not to worry is like telling them not to think about an elephant. The suggestion itself provokes images of elephants in our brains.

Furthermore, my wife Deb and I are champion worriers to begin with, so today's text from Matthew is particularly challenging for us to hear. And these days, life feels like one worry strung after another like lights on a Christmas tree. Worries about our country (when is the economy going to recover?). Worries at home (what college will my children be attending? When will I finish my dissertation?). Worries about...well, you name it (terrorism, natural disasters, the friend who was just diagnosed with cancer...). Do you see what I mean? Worries surround us like bees to honey.

And I don't think it's just me. I think we live in an incredibly anxious culture. The evening news helps feed our worries to attract viewers. People are worried about losing their jobs or losing their homes to foreclosure. And whenever I go to the airport I'm greeted by long security lines and signs informing me that, "The threat level, as determined by the Office for Homeland Security, is Orange." (I don't even know what "orange" is, but I'm betting it's not good.) So there it is: everywhere you turn, everywhere you look, there are reminders of just how much there is to worry about.

So how in the world, then, can Jesus possibly ask us – really, command us! – NOT to worry?

Wait a second, though. Did you notice that today's passage doesn't start with the injunction about worry? It begins at v. 24: “No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and wealth.” And actually, if we look closely at the text, we see that although the lectionary has us starting at v. 24, this passage really begins at v. 19: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” There's a double use of the word “treasure” here. Literally, the sentence says, “Do not treasure treasures on earth...” Instead, we're to store up our treasures in a more durable place: God's heavenly kingdom.

And then the passage moves to v. 24, which asserts that we can't serve two masters, both God and money. If we try, Jesus says, we'll end up loving one and hating the other. Notice that Jesus doesn't say money is evil or bad, just that it makes a poor master. Actually, the word in Greek is *kurios*, often translated "lord." The lord is the one who demands and deserves our loyalty, allegiance, and worship. So the anxiety Jesus condemns is specifically anxiety over money, over material things. The problem comes when we make money our god.

One cannot serve both God and wealth. Tom Long states that “God and wealth have different tasks in mind for their slaves. Wealth says, ‘Because of your superb credit, you are among the elite chosen to receive a Gold Card.’ God says, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’ Wealth says, ‘Indulge yourself, you’ve earned it.’ God says, ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.’ There are two masters, but only one servant. Living *the* good life and living *a* good life pull in opposite directions. One cannot serve both God and wealth.”¹

This image helps us better understand the rest of the passage, where Jesus tells us not to be anxious about material goods. The word “worry” or “anxiety” translates a Greek term which means “split attention” or “divided concern.”² So the center of Jesus’ teaching in this passage is “the fundamental problem of double vision, two masters, or divided concern.”³

This is important to note because it helps us make more sense of what Jesus says next. At first, Jesus’ words about the birds of the air and the lilies in the field, lovely as they are, are not very convincing. Sure, birds and lilies don’t worry about life, but they also don’t have to worry about mortgages, car payments, grocery bills, and college tuitions. All of us would like to be rid of anxiety over these kinds of things, but Jesus appears to be suggesting

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, p. 75.

² Fred Craddock, *Preaching Through the Christian Year A*, p. 125.

³ Craddock, p. 125.

an unrealistic strategy – “look at the birds, look at the lilies” – “to which one is tempted to reply, ‘Yes, but look at the bills!’”⁴

Jesus, however, is not suggesting we live our lives in a careless or irresponsible way. “Jesus condones neither wanton greed nor personal irresponsibility.”⁵ What Jesus is warning against is a “slavish, anxious, worried service to wealth as though money were one’s owner or master. This is the distortion that splits or divides a life between God and things, between persons and wealth, between love of others and greed.”⁶

The cure for such a life is not to regard all material things and money as evil. On the contrary, the text states that God knows we need these things and God will supply them. No, the cure is to trust in God’s providence, to trust that there is nothing in this world that can take away what God provides – dignity and the confidence that God loves and treasures us as his children. The cure is to realize and remember that, although a lot of good can be done with money, money can never satisfy our deepest needs and therefore makes a very poor god.

Theologian N.T. Wright says, “God wants his human creatures above all to trust him and love him and receive their own beauty, energy and excitement from him. So when Jesus tells us not to worry about what to eat,

⁴ Long, p. 75.

⁵ Barbara Essex, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 1*, p. 408.

⁶ Craddock, p. 126.

or drink, or wear, he doesn't mean that these things don't matter...the point was again priorities. Put the world first, and you'll find it gets moth-eaten in your hands. Put God first, and you'll get the world thrown in."⁷

The alternative Jesus invites us to consider is entering into relationship with God, the God who is infinite and whose love for us and all creation is infinite as well. David Lose, Professor of Preaching at Luther Theological Seminary, writes, "Love operates from a different 'economy' than money." I know what he means. As local scientist John Medina states, "By the time my second child was born, I understood that it is possible to split up love ad infinitum and not decrease any single portion of it. With parenting, it is truly possible to multiply by dividing."⁸

No doubt you've noticed the same thing: how the more love you give away, the more you have. "Love – and especially God's love – cannot be counted, tracked or stockpiled. And when you live in this kind of relationship of love and trust, you've entered into the realm of abundance, the world of possibility, the world of contentment. Suddenly, in this world – Jesus calls it the 'kingdom of God' – not worrying actually becomes an option."⁹

⁷ N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, p. 66.

⁸ John Medina, *Brain Rules for Baby*, Introduction.

⁹ David Lose, *Working Preacher*, Feb. 27, 2011.

What does it look like to actually live this way? I once heard an illustration told by Earl Palmer that helped me to understand this better: Have you ever been to a great reception? Maybe it's a fancy wedding reception where they have really nice food and perhaps even an ice sculpture in the middle of the room.

There's actually a strategy for going to a reception like this. Don't waste time at the table with the crackers or the carrots and celery, but go to the ice sculpture right away. And you have to get there before the greedy people get there for all the best food items. Look first for the shrimp.

Now, one problem about receptions is that they usually only offer small plates, a little tiny plate. But you go to the shrimp display, and if you line them up around and make them snug around the corner, you can get quite a few shrimp even in a little round plate. And then move over to the smoked salmon, which always go very fast because, you know, people can be greedy. They'll go for those right away. So, first fill up your plate with the shrimp and smoked salmon. Stay near the middle of the reception - don't go out on the edges where the chips and the vegetables are. They fill up your plate anyway and make it hard for the good stuff to fit.

All right, now I'm going to add something to this story. You walk into this reception. You start to head over to the middle of the table and the

host catches up with you. The host then says, “I’m so glad you came to the reception. I was hoping you would come. Now, I know you love shrimp and smoked salmon. And I want to tell you something else. Look over there on the dessert table, Grammie Hannay’s apple pie, your very favorite pie.

Now, when you leave today please drop by the kitchen. I’ve asked the chef to make a whole plate of shrimp just for you and smoked salmon just for you and a whole apple pie just for you. Take it home. I want you to have it. Now go and have a nice time at the reception.”

OK, notice how your attitude changes. You head over to the table and walk over to the carrots and celery section. Get a few chips. You say to people, “Be sure to try the shrimp. And I understand the salmon is delicious.”

Now what’s happened to you? Why are you suddenly so generous? It’s because your needs have been met – you no longer worry that you won’t get your share. That’s what grace does at a far profounder level than with food. Grace fulfills your needs and one result is less anxiety and more generosity. When we experience Christ’s love, when we experience his grace, the inevitable result is generosity of spirit. We loosen our hands, because our profoundest needs have been met. There’s no more need to worry.

Jesus' call to worry-free living is not based on unrealistic views of the world. His words are for those who understand that God will not leave us alone without his support. We can face life with all its uncertainties with the assurance that we're not alone – that God hears, sees, and cares about us. Bobby McFerrin was right when he sang "Don't worry, be happy," because God is in control. Amen.