

“Don’t Worry, Be Happy”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
May 25, 2008
Scripture: Matthew 6:24-35

I will admit to having a few phobias. I worry about biking across bridges. I worry about hiking too close to cliffs. I worry that I will drop my camera from high places. Some similarities there – I fear being close to the edge of high places. But I also worry about going to the doctor. I worry about tornadoes. I worry that I will forget to change my clock as we move into and out of daylight savings times. I feel that as a result, I am prudent and prepared. My wife sees it differently. She calls me a worrywart. It drives her crazy sometimes.

Last week, during my sermon about Sabbath rest, I admitted that I was preaching not only to you, and not only to the choir, but also to myself – a person with workaholic tendencies. Today, I will again confess right up front. These few verses from the Sermon on the Mount contain one of the hardest teachings of Jesus for me to follow. I am an all-star worrier.

But I don’t think that I am alone here today as someone who worries. I have heard your worries as well. And worries that are more grounded in reality than mine. Worries about what the doctor will say at the six month follow-up visit, after you have been told that the cancer will never be completely gone. Worries about increasing mortgage payments that leave you on the edge of foreclosure. Worries about making the bills meet. Worries about keeping or finding a job in our rather precarious economy. Worries about the high risk pregnancy. Worries about your children, navigating the challenges of late-teen and young adult years. Worries about caring for your spouse as the toll of disease wears on the body and mind of the one you love.

On this Memorial Day weekend, many simply bask in an extra day off – a long weekend that is for once free of worries. An extra day off for those who work. With beautiful Spring weather finally here, a chance to have friends over and grill. It is easy to forget that tomorrow is a holiday intended to commemorate, to memorialize U.S. soldiers who have died in military service. And when one remembers the purpose of the holiday, it is not easy to be free of worries. We have close connections in this congregation with people serving in Iraq, where the risk to civilians and soldiers continues and the death tolls continue. We have a friend who is in the Army and is preparing for deployment to Iraq – and I worry for her.

And so, even on this weekend, with me as your worrywart preacher, with legitimate fears and concerns heavy on the hearts of many, we approach the Bible. And Jesus, in the middle of his “Sermon on the Mount,” shocks us by saying, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life.” Do not worry? Doesn’t he know what is going on with our lives?

A month or so ago, the choir sang an anthem written by Bobby McFerrin using the 23rd Psalm. More than most music, this anthem got your attention. Some of you loved it. Others hated it. As an aside, I would like to say how much I appreciated

conversations about that anthem with those of you in both camps. Bobby McFerrin drew pop music attention for his hit song, "Don't Worry, Be Happy."

Here's a little song I wrote
 You might want to sing it note for note
 Don't Worry — Be Happy
 In every life we have some trouble
 But when you worry you make it Double
 Don't Worry — Be Happy
 Ain't got no place to lay your head,
 somebody came and took your bed
 Don't Worry, Be Happy
 The landlord say your rent is late,
 he may have to litigate
 Don't Worry — Be Happy
 Ain't got not cash, ain't got no style,
 ain't got no gal to make you smile
 Don't Worry — Be Happy
 Cause when you worry your face will frown
 and that will bring everybody down
 Don't Worry — Be Happy

Jesus does not use the same line of argument. He does not pose worry as the opposite of happiness. There are those who say that the most important thing in life is to "be happy." I don't think that Jesus would necessarily agree. "If any want to become my followers," Jesus said, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matt 16:24-25). There is something about the cross that makes me think happiness is not the sum total of human existence. There are deeper and more meaningful pursuits than "the pursuit of happiness" as it states in the Declaration of Independence.

So Jesus never uses the words, "be happy," in this passage of teachings from the Sermon on the Mount. But otherwise, his words are not far from Bobby McFerrin's song. "Do not worry about your life," he says. Do not worry about:

What you will eat or drink
 Or about your body
 Or about what you will wear - your clothing.

"It is fine for Jesus to say don't worry about what you will wear," one of our recent new members in the confirmation class might remind us. Jesus, as far as we know, never had to endure a day in junior high school being laughed at for wearing your brother's hand me down clothes that were no longer cool! How hard is it to pick out a robe, which is what it seemed like everyone wore back in those days!

When I first read this passage I thought that maybe Jesus was only talking about surface level worries. He does summarize, there in verse 31, "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'" Even I, the

consummate worrier, can agree that those are rather trivial concerns to spend much time dwelling upon.

But I am not so sure we can dismiss him as simply arguing against vanity. No, it seems he is urging a deeper philosophy – that worrying is wrong and unhelpful. In fact, he doesn't just urge his followers not to worry about what we will eat or drink or wear. He also says, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" (Matt 6:27).

We're not talking whether to worry about which brands of jeans to wear, anymore. Now he is talking about life and death issues! And doctors, as we are reminded every time we go in for a physical, would disagree. Exercising just three times a week for thirty minutes will substantially reduce your risk factors. Lowering your cholesterol and blood pressure will improve your odds against an early heart attack. Stop smoking. All these things will likely add hours, even years, to our lives

So no, we cannot simply dismiss Jesus' words about worrying as encouraging us to be less vain and less superficial. This passage begins with Jesus saying that "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" (Matt 6:24-25). So somehow, this teaching about not worrying is linked into a basic question of trust. Ultimately, Thomas Long, writes, "whether one serves God or wealth depends upon trust."

The appeal to trust God is the goal of Jesus' picture of the birds of the air, who are fed by God even though they neither fret nor plan, and the lilies of the field, gloriously and colorfully clothed even though they have never touched a needle and thread. If God takes care of the birds and the wild flowers, Jesus promises, then surely God will take care of us.¹

And when we are honest with ourselves, we realize that we have placed our trust in many things other than God. We have put our trust in national defense, trusting the government to keep us safe from terrorism. We have put our trust in emergency supplies, thinking that even if something awful happens we will have our private supply of water and canned goods. We have put our trust, and our treasure, into bank accounts and mutual funds. None of those things are bad in themselves. But when we value the illusion of our own security above and beyond our trust in God, we have lost our way.

It is to this temptation, to think that we can insure ourselves against the natural but unexpected tragedies of life that Jesus is preaching about. Consider the lilies, he says. Get a good look at the rest of creation. Consider the birds, and then realize that God's gracious and tender care extends even to our lives. "The rent is still due, of course,"² but Jesus has invited us in to use our imaginations and really see the world as it is. Full of beauty, full of other creatures, full of life and death and God's loving care reaches over its entirety.

Tom Long sums up what this passage, in the end, means for us.

There is a kind of worry about the coming day that is normal, even healthy. Tomorrow's chemistry test or job interview is bound to provoke concern, and this

command “do not worry about tomorrow” is not an invitation to finesse the exam or waltz into the interview unprepared. Rather, it speaks to the deeper, more basic fear that something is out there in the future that can destroy our basic worth as a human being, something finally stronger than God’s care, some silent killer shark swimming toward us from the future.

The statement that “today’s trouble is enough for today” (Matt. 6:34) was probably a popular saying that becomes, in the context of Jesus’ sermon, a kingdom saying. Those who know that God summons the sun to rise are confident that, whatever tomorrow brings, it will also bring God with it. So, they are content to leave tomorrow’s trouble to tomorrow, to roll up their sleeves, and as children of the kingdom face the problems that walk through the door today.³

Anxieties can paralyze us from living life fully. Our worries can keep us from appreciating life – and even from following Christ. I’m not planning to go bungee jumping this afternoon, but I do hope to set aside some of my worries for now. The poet Jane Kenyon, as she battled cancer, wrote a poem that helps me think about trusting God and appreciating beauty. Her poem is called *Otherwise*.

I got out of bed
 on two strong legs.
 It might have been
 otherwise. I ate
 cereal, sweet
 milk, ripe, flawless
 peach. It might
 have been otherwise.
 I took the dog uphill
 to the birch wood.
 All morning I did
 the work I love.

At noon I lay down
 with my mate. It might
 have been otherwise.
 We ate dinner together
 at a table with silver
 candlesticks. It might
 have been otherwise.
 I slept in a bed
 in a room with paintings
 on the walls, and
 planned another day
 just like this day.
 But one day, I know,
 it will be otherwise.⁴

¹ Thomas G. Long, Matthew in the Westminster Bible Companion series. (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 75.

² *Ibid.*, 76.

³ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴ Jane Kenyon, Collected Poems (Graywolf Press, 2007).