

A Worry-Free Faith

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Isaiah 49:13-15; 1 Corinthians 4:1-5; Matthew 6:24-34

“Therefore do not worry. . . .” -- Matthew 6:31a

Two weeks ago, I asked you not to take Jesus' words literally. Today, I'm going to ask you to. Not the same words, but words from the same collection of Jesus' words, which we have traditionally called the Sermon on the Mount.

Two weeks ago, I told you not to feel bad about your unfaithfulness since none of you had plucked out an eye or chopped off a hand because it caused you to sin; I told you then and tell you now that Jesus' words counseling such mutilations were not meant to be taken literally. “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away . . . if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. . . .” Those words were not meant to be taken literally because Jesus knew that the real cause of sin lies not in our eyes or in our hands, but rather in our wills, which are corrupted by selfishness. That's what St. Augustine meant when he defined sin as the will *curvatus in se*, that is, turned in on itself – self-directed, self-pleasing, self-absorbed, self-motivated, self-obsessed. We are free from sin when we are free from ourselves, and since that never happens completely in this life, we are never free from sin. “We are in bondage to sin,” the confession in one of our orders of service says, “and we cannot free ourselves.” That's very traditional language expressing a very traditional view about a very traditional problem, and it all got to be traditional not because it's wrong but because it's right – or at least more right than wrong.

But this sermon isn't about sin, it's about the self, the seat of sin, and it's based not on Jesus' often misunderstood words about self-mutilation, but rather on his words about anxiety, which are found a few verses later in the Sermon on the Mount.

“Therefore, I tell you, do not worry. . . .” That's chapter six, verse twenty-five. “Therefore, do not worry. . . .” That's verse thirty-one. “So, do not worry. . . .” that's verse thirty-four. Three times in these relatively few verses Jesus tells his disciples and tells us not to worry. Not to worry about food, not to worry about clothing, and not to worry about tomorrow. Why? Because there's not a thing we can do about any of it! Food, shelter, clothing, money, health, tomorrow – they're all ultimately beyond our control, and therefore not the proper objects of our concern.

So what's left? “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” That's what's left when you stop worrying about the things over which you ultimately have no control. God's realm and God's righteousness – they're left, and about them you *do* have some control. In fact, you have ultimate control as far as you're concerned because whether or not you seek God's realm first or something else first is entirely up to you. It's not partially up to you. It's not occasionally up to you. It's *entirely* up to you. Your priorities are entirely and exclusively your business, and how you order them is your life's chief work and, rightly

done, your life's chief joy. That's the good news – the great news – in this passage about worry-free faith: whether or not you choose to worry is entirely up to you, because Jesus tells us, assures us, promises us that we ultimately have nothing to worry about. And if that isn't good news in this age of anxiety, I don't know what is.

Now I realize, of course, that telling a bunch of anxious worriers such as we middle-class, middle-westerners tend to be is easier said than done, and that's okay, because preachers are paid to say things that are easier said than done. If most of what we said was easily done, we'd say it, you'd do it, and we'd find other work. But such is not the case, not with regard to loving our enemies, not with regard to loving God above all things, and not with regard to not worrying about the mundane realities over which we have so little control.

Worry, for some of us, seems to have been born with us along with our height and eye color, and for others of us, worry seems to have come with the territory, whether that territory be getting through middle school, parenting, or surviving a shaky economy.

But there's a difference between getting through this "troublesome life," in the words of Cardinal Newman's famous prayer, and worrying about getting through this troublesome life. The former is necessary and inevitable, the latter is not, and Jesus knew that and said so and urged his disciples to remember it.

He did not say that life would not have its share of troubles; in fact, he said so by way of concluding his counsel against worry: "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

Today, for anybody who's paying attention, has plenty of trouble, enough to go around and enough to last a lifetime, one troublesome day at a time. As Edna St. Vincent Millay famously and profanely put it, "It's not true that life is one damn thing after another; it's one damn thing over and over." Life has this maddening habit of presenting us, again and again, with the problems we thought we'd solved and the crises we thought we'd resolved. The same child is in trouble – again. The same car has broken down – again. The same argument is starting up – again. The same infection is returning – again.

We are creatures of habit, in part because life habitually happens to us, and the promise that Hinduism, for example, holds out to its devotees is release from this cycle of frustration and pain. Indeed, almost all great religions hold out some form of that promise, and the Christian faith is no exception. And whereas most Christians look to some sort of afterlife for such relief, Jesus' counsel in this morning's gospel is for us to look to this life for that relief because relief from anxiety is possible – right here, right now – because anxiety is pain that is self-inflicted. Let me say that again because it's important it's likely to be misunderstood. Anxiety is pain that is self-inflicted. No one and no thing inflicts anxiety on us; we inflict it on ourselves, and if we wish to be free of anxiety – and I'm speaking of anxiety as a way of life, as I believe Jesus was speaking of it in the Sermon on the Mount – if we wish to be free of anxiety as a lifestyle, we can be. That is our choice. We have the choice to be anxious about tomorrow, the kids, our health or the crisis spreading across north Africa right now, or we can seek God's realm first and live our lives accordingly, including our psychological and emotional lives, which is to say, free of worry.

Putting God's realm first in your life does not mean there won't be unrest in Libya. Making God's way your way does not mean that your business is going to succeed or that you won't have to move. Having Jesus' way as your way does not mean that your cancer or heart disease is going to go away. Not a bit, because we profess to be people who believe in God, not in magic, and a magical way of thinking says that if I do this for God, God will do that for me, or at least I hope God will. Millions of people have professed that

kind of religion, but I'm not one of them, and I do not commend it to you.

What I commend to you, however – and not just for your consideration, but for your whole-hearted commitment – is the way of life Jesus called God's realm. A way of being in this world such that we know, with unshakable conviction, that this world is not the only or best world there is. A way of being in this world that knows, with a peace that passes knowledge and understanding, as Dame Julian of Norwich put it, that "All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well." A way of being in this world that takes this broken and unjust world with just enough seriousness to struggle passionately for justice and peace, and with just enough perspective to know that the ultimate victory belongs to God. That's what a worry-free faith looks like, and that faith can be yours if you'll embrace it.

Yes, of course we should think; God gave us minds and expects us to use them. Yes, of course we should plan; God has put a sense of past, present, and future in us and doesn't expect us to waste energy being blindsided by the obvious. Yes, of course we should pay attention to ourselves and the world within us and around us because there is no working out of our own salvation, as Paul urged the Philippians to do, without being mindful.

But none of that equates with worry or anxiety. None of that equates with the lack of perspective that prevents us from keeping our priorities sorted out. And none of that equates with the failure of moral imagination and courage that gives rise to every form of violence, brutality, and oppression.

Let me close by telling you briefly about another of my heroes. I've told you in the past about Oseola McCarty, and this morning I'd like to say a bit about Miep Gies.

Miep Gies was Otto Frank's secretary. Otto Frank was the father of Anne Frank, the famous teenage diarist who died at the hands of the Nazis. When Miep Gies realized that her boss and his family were going to be rounded up and sent to concentration camps, she risked her life by hiding the Franks in a secret annex in Otto Franks' business. For two years, she was successful, and it was only through betrayal by an informant that the Franks were discovered and deported; all except Otto died in the camps. Miep herself managed to escape execution and survive the war, and when she was hailed as a hero later for putting herself in such danger, she always said that she did what she did not because she was a hero, but simply because it was the right thing to do.

How different might the world be, my friends, if more people gave up their worries about themselves or their families or their futures or what the neighbors might think or the authorities might do and did heroic things, not because they're heroic, but rather simply because they're the right thing to do? How different might *your* life be if you gave up worrying about tomorrow and started living God's realm today? Why don't you try it and find out for yourself.

Let us pray. O LORD, support us all the day long of this troublous life, until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then, in thy great mercy, grant us a safe lodging, a holy rest, and peace at the last; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*