

## WORRY

Matthew 6: 25-34

Have you ever met someone who doesn't worry about anything? I bet you haven't. Worry is something we all share no matter who we are and no matter what the circumstances or situations of our lives. Whether we are rich or poor, surrounded by family and friends or alone, young and strong or old and fragile, healthy and vigorous or plagued by various health issues physically and mentally, worry is something that functions in us all no matter what. Whether we live in prosperous democracies where we can rely on a system of law, human rights and a social safety net or whether we live in difficult places of the world where injustice and corruption are rampant, whether we are part of majority cultures and groups or we are part of a race or minority group that is vulnerable and persecuted, worry is something we all share no matter what. It's not a question of how much we have to worry about compared to someone else. Just telling us we have it so much better than others may help. But it won't eliminate worry in us. Why? Because worry is habitual. It's built into our genetic and evolutionary DNA. If we've overcome something we've been worrying about today, we will worry about something else tomorrow.

OK, so why do we worry? Well, we worry because we care. We care about ourselves and we care about others. We care about our world and we care about making it better where we can. But there is worry that can be constructive and part of healthy motivation to change ourselves and our world, and there is a whole lot of worry that just weighs us down and diminishes not only the quality of our relationships but our very souls. This negative kind of worry is usually rooted in fear. What fear?

In order to zero in on the negative kind of worry that is rooted in fear, let me introduce you to ancient Greek philosopher named Epicurus. Now whatever you've heard about Epicurus before, if you have, may be half-true at best. Probably the most popular quote from Epicurus is this: "Why worry? Eat and drink for tomorrow we die." Basically, take in and enjoy the moment and don't worry about tomorrow because tomorrow may not even come. Live in the present moment. Enjoy it, take it in, savour it and don't let it pass you by because you are preoccupied by what may come tomorrow. Now, there is truth here. But not enough truth. Let's take it further.

Epicurus lived a few hundred years before Jesus. He lived in a time that many social thinkers have named "The Axial Age." Over a thousand-year period, let's say, between 500BC and 500AD, there was a cosmic shift in how life and the world were conceptualized. This happened among the Greeks in the Mediterranean, the Hebrews in the Middle East, India, China and the far east world too. It was the age of philosophers, prophets, messiahs, enlightened humans, various revelations and scriptures. In the Greek world, Epicurus was part of a wave of thinkers who shifted

from a focus on science and how the world works, to moral questions of right and wrong and how we are to live in the world. His was a time where universal conceptions of God, justice and goodness were being developed.

So, Epicurus, like other philosophers of his time was concerned about how we must live in a world we cannot control. How do we live positively and constructively in the face of worry? We may worry because we care. But in order to engage our care constructively, we need to find a way to overcome the kind of worry that afflicts us with crippling fear.

Epicurus located the problem in us humans to a profound insecurity and insufficiency we carry. We never feel we have enough, and we never believe we are enough as human beings. Enough what? As one commentator on Epicurus put it: the disease we suffer from most is: A-little-more-ism, never-enough-ism, always-missing-something-ism. In Buddhism, it's called "craving." We are always craving something and therefore can never settle from a restlessness and dissatisfaction within. Here's a quote from Epicurus himself: "Nothing is enough for the person for whom enough is too little." We always want more as human beings. It's one thing to want more justice, for example. Think about all the racism that's been heightened lately, or the sexism and sexual harassment. More justice, more compassion, more equality, more decency and care for the vulnerable... We can never get enough of that if we care enough. But there is a whole lot of other more-ism worry that's rooted in deep fear, and such fear crowds out purer passions like justice and love.

Epicurus thinks about this negative kind of worry rooted in a fear of never having enough, in three ways. First, we can never have enough money and enough stuff. Maybe some of us suffer from this worry less than others, but it's there in many of us in some way. In a recent study individuals were questioned who made incomes ranging from \$50k to \$500k annually. No matter how much they made, the vast majority felt that if they only made 20% more, they would have enough. Clearly, the study results showed that unless something else changes in a person, no matter how much they make and no matter how much stuff they have it will never be enough. There will always be a craving for more.

Second, we worry about our status. We are prone to comparison with others and competition with them and we are always prone to suffer from a sense of inadequacy. We are dependent on others being worse than us or others praising and admiring us. Social media only makes this worse. We are vulnerable to what others think and the judgements they make. We will never be enough or if we do feel enough, that is all too vulnerable to change as things around us change. We worry constantly about our status in the world. We can live in a small apartment and have few things and feel we look decent enough, and as long as there are enough people around us who compare and support our self-concept, we're ok. But

in a world of social media, feeling inadequate is more extreme than ever. We worry about how we measure in comparison to our neighbours as much as we worry about our finances and how much we have in comparison to others. We can never be enough, and we can never have quite enough.

Finally, we can never have enough power and control over our lives. Circumstances and other people are a constant threat in terms of the power and control they have over us in some way. As much as we take care of ourselves we cannot totally control our health or the health of anyone we care about. We cannot control what others think of us or how they will treat us. We cannot control the weather or the effects of a pandemic and how everyone else around us behaves which impinges directly on our own well-being and safety. We can never have enough power and control over our lives and our environment to eliminate worry.

OK, so how do we deal with this negative kind of worry, this never-quite-enough-ism, this just-a -little-more-ism? Well, Epicurus established a whole community, a community whose whole focus was on learning to be content with bare-bones simplicity. Unless we learn simplicity and practice simplicity, we will never be able to find inner peace. The word Epicurus developed for this state of inner peace in simplicity is "*ataraxia*." To be in a state of *taraxia* is to be restless and turbulent, constantly stressed and anxious in negative worry. To be *ataraxos* is to be unperturbed by what is happening outside you in terms of what others have, how they compare to you, and how much power and control they have more than you. The therapy of *ataraxia* is to give this more-ism up and let it go. The therapy is learning to savour the simple things – a slice of bread, a laugh with a friend, a caring hug, a flower blooming awaiting your notice... If you cannot savour things like this and feel your heart full, you will never have enough even if you have the whole world.

Lots of wisdom here for sure. Savour the moment and savour the now. Don't preoccupy yourself with tomorrow because you keep things simple and predictable enough to minimize negative worry. But is that enough? Jesus would think Epicurus a wise man. Some of what Jesus says in our scripture reading, in fact, could be lifted straight out of Epicurus' philosophy. But Epicurus has also left something essential out. And in order to draw this missing ingredient out, let's zero in on our scripture reading.

Like Epicurus, Jesus, too, refers to 'more.' Here's what he says: "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?" Jesus goes on to teach that we should not compare ourselves to other people, but to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. They are content and they are beautiful in a way that those who have massive wealth, power and control

can never match. And yet, the birds and the lilies do not suffer from the fear and threat of worry or the disease of more-ism. They are content with what is. They are free to just be who they are. They fly gracefully and bloom beautifully as they are.

But unlike Epicurus, Jesus also teaches that we humans need something different as well. He says this: “But strive first for the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” The kingdom of God is about a network of relationships rooted in love, not fear, in giving more not needing more, establishing friendship not competition, acceptance not comparison, seeing beauty not deficiency, feeling surrounded and grounded not seeking to control from fear of being controlled. Building such a network of relationships under God’s rule of love is essential therapy in order to re-orient our passions and let go debilitating worry.

According to Jesus, then, it’s not just about giving up and letting go an anxious hunger for more and a fear of never having enough. It’s not just about practicing simplicity as a therapeutic response. It’s also about developing our passion for more love and more justice, trusting that this kind of more-ism will ground us in a different kind of fullness where the wrong kind of more-ism and never-enough-ism no longer grips us with fear and worry the same.

Worry will never be eliminated. The key, rather, is to differentiate healthy worry from life-sucking, negative worry. The difference is whether love is driving us, or fear is gripping us. Are we worried about what is happening to our neighbour and how the colour of their skin, their race, their sexuality or gender are reasons they are put down, mistreated and rejected; or, are we worried about how much more we can make and have and be than our neighbour and how much more power and control we can get against all that threatens us? The alternatives are very clear. Jesus was challenging, is challenging people to make a choice, and then develop the spiritual muscle to live into that choice. We won’t eliminate worry. The question is: what is it that you and I worry about most? Is it life-giving or life-sucking? Is it because we love or because we fear?

Let’s be honest, all of us are caught somewhere in the middle between love and fear. But we gather for worship and open our hearts so that the divine pull of love, the Spirit in the birds and the lilies, may flow into us ever more fully and pull us out of fear into love and out of life-sucking worry into greater passion to build community around justice and righteousness. This is what we want to build at Armour Heights – a community of justice and righteousness. With all our brokenness and imperfection we gather and connect so that we build each other up. Are you with us?

Let us pray: Thank you, O God, for awakening us and calling us. Thank you for meeting us in the pit of our brokenness, our worry, our fear. Raise us up so that

your kingdom righteousness and the fullness of your love becomes ever more our passion... Amen.