

Worry, Trust and Contentment

Matthew 6:25-34; Philippians 4:11-13

Today's sermon is about "Worry, Trust and Contentment." This hits us where we live most hours of our days. "Don't worry!", people say, but that's like saying, "Don't think about zebras!" Now you can't get zebras out of your brain.

Right in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus talks with us about worry and anxiety and what we worry about. It's about "Contentment" too. I'm calling on Paul for a little help on that later on.

I

Let's start where Jesus starts, with worry and anxiety. Anyone out there free of such? I've preached this text a dozen or so times through the years, and I still worry.

Jesus begins, "Don't be full of worry." That's the sense of it. A certain amount to worry is necessary in life. It helps us anticipate what we need and prods us to do something about it. But Jesus is talking about excess worry, being full of worry, becoming a prisoner to worry.

And he is addressing a particular kind of worry—worry about daily things, what we shall eat, what we shall drink, what we shall wear. We can get

preoccupied about such things. Anne Lamott tells of going to her best friend who was in the hospital dying. During the visit Anne asked her friend, “Are my pants too tight?” her friend said, “Honey, we don’t have time for that.”

Don’t ask me how much time I spend thinking about what to wear to church on Sunday morning. Years ago, I was going to lecture on preaching in Florida on the topic, “Variety in Preaching”. When I got there they had printed the title “Vanity in Preaching”. There’s that too!

So Jesus pokes us gently and says, “Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?” His disciples may have said to him: “That’s easy for you to say, you can multiply loaves and fish!” Did Jesus ever roll his eyes? Did Mary cook him his meals and mend his clothes?

But Jesus turns our eyes to the birds of the air and the wild flowers of the Galilean hillsides and meadows. “Look at the birds”, Jesus said, “They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly *Abba* feeds them!” Consider the wildflowers of the field and how they grow. They neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.” Who could argue that! Our most glorious fashions pale in comparison to the beauty of creation.

So don't worry about such things, Jesus said, your heavenly *Abba* will look after you.

II

“Don't worry”, we might be saying “I get the point, but *how* not worry!” And Jesus begins to teach us about trust. Trust is deeper than faith. We might say, trust is faith that has moved from your head to your heart. At the heart of Jesus' spirituality was his utmost trust in *Abba*, his heavenly father. And he said that we can live with that kind of trust too.

So Jesus says, if God so clothes the wildflowers, will our *Abba* not so much more clothe you? You of teeny, weeny faith? (My translation). So don't be worn out with worry about such things. Then he brings in the Gentiles. Clarence Jordan translates this verse in Southern vernacular: “For the people of the world go tearing around after all these things!”

People joke about what they call “retail therapy”. Going to the mall when you are feeling blue or anxious. Buying something to fill up the hole inside. Does that ever work? Or buying a new car because that will make you feel successful and happy. And the car dealer will delay your first payment for six months to make it easy to drive that baby home. Does it work? Does it work for long?

So Jesus concludes, “But seek first the kingdom and its values and all these things will be yours as well.” This is no magic formula. This is not Magic Jesus saying if you follow me you’ll have all you want. That is the American prosperity gospel, but not the Jesus of the gospels.

I think what he is saying is something like this: Seek first the kingdom and its values and everything else will find its proper place.

There’s this scene in the movie *City Slickers* which I love. The character played by Jack Palance is trying to teach the character played by Billy Crystal about life.

Palance asks: “You know what the secret of life is?” Crystal says, “No, what?” Palance holds up one finger. “One thing, just one thing. You stick to that and everything else don’t mean [nothing].” (P.G. Sunday morning version).

“What’s the one thing?”

“That’s for you to figure out”, he says.

Jesus is saying if you make the kingdom and its values *the one thing*, everything else will sort itself out.

Then Jesus adds one more piece of wisdom for good measure:

“Don’t worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today’s troubles are enough for today.” How easy it is to double today’s troubles by adding on what we fear tomorrow may bring. Regret over our yesterdays and worry about our tomorrows are two thieves robbing us of today.

There’s an old hymn that goes
Many things about tomorrow
I don’t seem to understand
But I know who holds tomorrow
and I know who holds my hand.

Tomorrow is in better hands than ours.

II

But there one more thing that Jesus is trying to get across, one more piece of the puzzle about worry and anxiety. And that is the *gift of enough*, the gift of contentment. Here is part of the secret of happiness Jesus was talking about in the Beatitudes.

A New Testament scholar was lecturing about happiness and said the word that describes happiness for him is contentment, and he gave the example of his father-in-law at dinner. He would sit, savor every bite of the dish in front of him,

never ask for a second helping, push the dish away, sit back and say, Thank you, God. Contentment.

It is a scourge of the human soul to say “I do not have enough.” And it is a grace of the human soul to say “What I have is enough”. It doesn’t matter how much or little you have, the question comes: “What is enough?” And here I invite Paul into our conversation. In his letter to the Philippians he wrote:

...I have learned in whatever state I am in to be content. I know how to be abased and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstance I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:11-13)

On the face of it this last sentence seems Pollyanna-ish or overly pious. A better translation would be “I am enabled to face all circumstances with Christ who strengthens me.”

We all want that secret Paul is talking about. Notice twice Paul says he has *learned* it. He didn’t start out with it when he became a follower of Jesus. But we all yearn to be content with who we are, and what we have, and amid the circumstances of our lives, to live with a kind of serenity in all kinds of weather.

Wendell Berry writes about that kind of contentment in his poem, “The Wild Geese”:

...Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love and sleep, holds
them to their way, clear
in the ancient faith: What we need
is here. And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye
clear. What we need is here. ¹

That's what we want isn't it? To be quiet in heart and in eye clear? To know our value in God's eyes, to find what is most important, to live with trust and contentment.

A Japanese student in one congregation gave me the work of a calligraphy artist of the words of Jesus in this passage. It hangs in my house. It is reproduced on your bulletin covers. The Japanese letters say. "Birds of the air. Flowers of the field." The sage Samuel Johnson said that we more frequently require to be *reminded* than informed. This calligraphy is my reminder of the way and words of Jesus. What we need is here.

Wendell Berry, "The Wild Geese", *Collected Poems, 1957-1982* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 155-6.