

Don't Worry!

Matthew 6:24-34

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Do you believe in time travel? In case you're skeptical, let me tell you that I personally travel through time quite a bit. You might be surprised to know how often I am actually living in the future! The word for that is *worry*. Worry is living in the future instead of in the present. For example, about mid-way through this past week, I was trying hard to get this sermon written and finished. I knew that I would spend Friday and Saturday traveling to and from Cincinnati to hear our son Jonathan present his college senior recital. I wanted get the sermon finished so that I could relax and enjoy being there, knowing how tight the schedule would be coming back late Saturday. And each time I sat down to work on the sermon, I started thinking that I had to get it done. What will happen if I don't? Suddenly, the question became, "What do I have to say that is meaningful?" Then there were a few more what ifs and pretty soon I found myself living somewhere between Saturday night and Sunday morning which, at that point, was in the future. I was living in the future, but I had lost touch with the power to do anything positive. It was still Wednesday and not Saturday night at all. I was just worrying.

Worrying about one thing always seems to put me on the worry track and I start worrying about other things. The only result of this worry last week was that I felt anxious. I was not able to think clearly about what would be helpful. All that worry gave me was a feeling of being anxious. That's really helpful, isn't it? Just so you know, we can also live in the past. The phrase, "if only I..." is a sign that I'm living in guilt – living in the past.

Today, we'll concentrate on traveling forward in time through worry. A point of clarification – living in the future for a brief time, for purposes of planning and preparing, is called planning and preparing! This is important in order to be ready for that time when the future becomes the present. In case you're wondering, I was able to finish the sermon, though not before going to Cincinnati. Worry is more like building a home in the future that keeps you from living and preparing for the present. Worry raises anxiety and diverts attention.

It is written that Jesus said, "Don't worry about life. Don't worry about what you will eat or drink. Don't worry about your clothes. You know life is more than food and your body is more than clothing. After all, God feeds the birds and clothes the wildflowers. You are more valuable than the birds and the flowers, aren't you?" It may well be true that we are of more value than the birds and wildflowers and that, since God provides for them, we too should trust in divine providence. But life isn't exactly easy for wildlife is it.. After all, doesn't heaven help those who help themselves?

Growing up and taking responsibility is central to maturing as a person. I am responsible not only for feeding and clothing myself, but also my children and perhaps others who are not able to help themselves. Isn't this basic to what it means to be a mature and responsible adult? Doesn't God intend each of us to grow up and take on such responsibility? It is a conundrum: to be responsible yet not to worry. To be an adult

consists of three things in terms of responsibility: to take responsibility for our own actions, not to take on responsibility for the choices of others, and to be responsible for how we respond to their choices.

In the midst of figuring out how to be responsible in my relationship to others without become responsible for others, Jesus tells us, “Don’t worry.” Singer Bobby McFarren tells us, “Don’t worry. Be happy!” But for me, the reassurance about not worrying is located somewhere other than with the image of wild birds and wild flowers – at least the usual interpretation of them happily living a carefree existence letting nature provide. Actually, being wildlife can be pretty stressful. I’ve seen those nature shows. The birds of the air are always searching for food and always in danger of being food!

The answer to the dilemma of living responsibly without worrying is found in the opening verses of today’s scripture passage. “You can’t worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you’ll end up hating the other. Adoration of one feeds contempt for the other. You can’t worship God and Money both. The answer is that we must choose whom we serve. To put it even more bluntly, we do choose whom we serve. We choose each day and the consequences of our choice give us the results we live with both personally and as a society.

We had a congregational meeting recently. As people were sharing their sense of excitement and also concern about plans for coming year, a theme kept emerging. It had to do with people feeling stressed and worn out by the pace of their lives. Even as they felt excited about the possibilities lying ahead, they were anxious about anything that would add more to their calendars and demand more of their energy.

There are a lot of people in churches who are approaching burn out. I’ve heard it in church groups and in social settings. We’re almost expected to complain about how busy we are and about the pace of life. At the same time, it’s my perception that being busy boosts our egos and helps us feel worthwhile. Can you imagine not having enough going on that you don’t need a *Day Planner*?

All of this seems to be part of living in this society. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says that we try to do more and more in an effort to be, or at least feel, adequate. We are on a treadmill that ultimately accomplishes little and leaves us feeling inadequate. In such a world, faith and church become just one more item to scheduled and one more bill to pay. Experiences, including religious ones, become commodities to be bought and sold. It appears that American society knows very little about observing Sabbath.

The fourth commandment is to *remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy*. This is how we serve God. In the Exodus version of the Ten Commandments, we need to observe Sabbath because God “made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day.” Since we are made in God’s image as creators of life, we need to emulate our Creator by observing Sabbath.

There is another version of the Ten Commandments in the book of Deuteronomy. Here, the reason for observing Sabbath, for keeping it holy, is that “you were a slave in the land of Egypt.” Brueggemann points out that Sabbath is a way of living that affirms God’s abundance. Sabbath is a time to step back from the process of making a living – of striving -- to remember that life is a gift. At Sabbath, we all come before God as equals: rich and poor, powerful and powerless, those who are industrious and those who are not. Sabbath is a time to let go of striving for adequacy through our labor and embrace the fundamental reality that we are created acceptable to God – who we are and as we are.

Sabbath is basic to the journey of faith as described in the Bible. Sabbath is also in significant tension with our current societal culture. The pain we feel is the result of our wanting to live in both worlds – to have it both ways. The message of our culture is that we need to work hard in order not to be poor – in order to be safe. We need to labor in order to escape the specter of scarcity -- to be adequate and acceptable. This message of being adequate has little to do with the physical reality of having enough food, shelter, and clothing. It is a matter of having enough to feel acceptable according to the standards of society. That is the call of the god of money, the god of stuff that seeks our loyalty. That call, that message, does not coexist peacefully with God’s abundance – that we are fully and completely acceptable, adequate, and that we are deeply loved.

The challenge we face is to change our perspective and see the rest of life through the lens of faith and abundance. I still try to have it both ways – to appease the demands of the culture by trying to achieve adequacy while also satisfying the perceived demands of the church to be more like Jesus. Once in a great while, I think I am almost good enough to pull it off. That achievement allows me to live the lie a little longer.

The invitation is to let go an attitude of scarcity and embrace an attitude of abundance. This is more of a process than a single choice. Curiously, I find that the scarcity is really hard to leave. It is addictive. Ironically, the only way I usually make such a challenging change in my life is when the pain of trying to have it both ways gets acute enough. Maybe that’s the roll burnout plays for us – making it painful enough to make significant changes? If so, then perhaps change is coming soon. I am convinced that this is the issue of our lives, that this is the challenge for our journey now.

I am also convinced it is the church that holds the key. If we will serve God rather than money or power or security, then the choices of our lives will have to reflect that service. If we choose not to worry, then we will need to find ways to live in the present and to be present to others in our lives. Peace is a process – a journey. Come, walk the journey with this congregation. Bring your questions. Bring your wisdom. And don’t worry! God, who holds all the yesterdays and tomorrows of our lives, also holds us eternally in each present moment through the Spirit of Christ. Amen.