

How to Know When It's Time to Worry

Matthew 25:1-13

How do you know when it's time to worry? Worry can be defined as living in the future instead of the present. It involves making up a future to avoid being in the present. What is so bad about worry? Worry takes us out of being open to the present moment, the only real moment. To get caught in worry is not to be available in relationship – not to be open to life's blessings. It is to be out of touch with a sense of abundance and not awake to God's Spirit. That is missing out on a lot!

What do you worry about? Why do we worry? It can seem demonic. From that perspective, worry is a manifestation of evil that pulls us away from being open and available to God, to life's abundance. From the perspective of science, worry is a manifestation of a natural process, the survival instinct we share with all life – with other mammals, birds, and even reptiles. Of course, with us that instinct may have gone overboard. The reptilian part of our brain senses danger -- at one point, a predator, and now more often a predatory boss or some other menace – and starts secreting adrenalin that triggers the instinct to fight or run away.

The trouble is most of us nowadays don't face those sorts of predators. We keep responding to daily situations of feeling threatening with this survival mechanism. It comes out as anxiety, feelings of stress, anger, or in the extreme as violence. We just wear ourselves out worrying about what we can't do much of anything about!

So, worry sounds pretty negative. Is there anything positive about worry? There seems to be two kinds of worry – wasted and useful. Wasted worry invents a future to dread that blocks our participation in the present. Maybe useful worry is what helps us dream solutions to problems that are not even yet fully present, but are clearly coming. Maybe worry helps us prepare for the future so we are ready to meet it.

This brings us to today's Gospel lesson. It was time to worry for ten bridesmaids. These young maidens were waiting for the bridegroom to arrive and take them in to the wedding feast. Five of the maidens were considered wise because they brought extra oil for their lamps. The others were foolish for not taking that precaution. When the bridegroom failed to arrive at the expected time, all ten fell asleep. Around midnight, there was a shout. "The bridegroom is here! Arise, light your lamps!" Those five maidens with extra oil were ready to meet the bridegroom, but the five without were left out. They did not get to go into feast.

This is not story about sharing and the point is not to criticize those maidens who would not share. It is not about oil, but rather about the inner work of being ready in life. This is work that we cannot do for each other. Each of us must do for ourselves. The point is that the foolish maidens were not prepared for their moment of truth. They were not ready when the crisis arrived.

Parables have different meanings depending on who hears and interprets them. Matthew's readers had been waiting for Jesus' second coming for decades after Jesus' death and resurrection. Some ten to fifteen years before the writing of Matthew's gospel, Jerusalem had been devastated and the Temple destroyed. Their question was about the reality and the faithfulness of God. In that time and context, this would have been a parable of faithful waiting, of being ready by not forgetting. In our day and context, this is more a parable of being prepared. Father Richard Rohr has written:

I've been studying Joseph Campbell's books on the hero's journey in myth and story. He says that the only way to be a hero is to prepare and *be ready* when the moment comes. You can't pick ahead of time which dragon you'll slay. The opportunity always sneaks up on you, and then all you can do is *be ready*. The teachings of Jesus are very clear on this: When the crisis comes you must know how to respond courageously and with conscience so you'll do the heroic thing.

The message Matthew's Gospel offers us for our world is the warning to be ready for the crisis when it comes. There is a real sense in which every crisis is an *eschaton*, the "end of days," the death of what has been. Every significant crisis in our lives is a manifestation of the apocalypse and the daily events are rehearsals for these crises. The kingdom of God is not so much a future place as a present reality. We prepare for its *coming* by waking up to that reality, by filling our lives with the oil of awareness, and by allowing God to fill us.

Jesus' teachings invite us to be on a journey that is not necessarily from here to there -- not toward a distant kingdom, but a journey into the depth of knowing ourselves. This journey is the process of expanding our awareness of the world, of the reality around us. On this journey, we come to experience God's presence in the air we breathe, in the lives we touch, and in the lives that touch ours.

So, is it time to worry? My experience is that worry usually happens before the danger is fully upon us. Worry is a created danger that distracts us from the present moment. Don't worry, just be prepared. The extra oil we need is in the form of skills: finding our center, practicing breathing, learning stillness, being grounded, and becoming immersed in God's life. These skills enable us to wake up to the holiness that is all of life.

When the dragon comes and the crisis is upon us, there is no time to worry. There is only time for heroic action -- only time for the struggle.

One day, while crossing the Umbrian plain on horseback, Francis Bernardone encountered a poor leper. This repulsive object filled him with disgust and he instinctively retreated, but presently controlling his natural aversion he dismounted, embraced the unfortunate man, and gave him all the money he had. Not long after his return to Assisi, whilst Francis was praying and he heard a voice saying: "Go, Francis, and repair my house, which as you see is falling into ruin." Taking this behest literally, Francis went to his father's shop, impulsively bundled together a load of colored drapery, and mounting his horse sold both horse and stuff to procure the money needful for the restoration of St. Damian's. Francis' father was incensed and sought not only to recover the money Francis

had given away, but also to force his son to forego his inheritance. This Francis was only too eager to do. He stripped himself of the very clothes he wore, and gave them to his father, saying: "Hitherto I have called you my father on earth; henceforth I desire to say only 'Our Father who art in Heaven'."

Once when Francis was hearing Mass in the chapel of St. Mary of the Angels, near which he had then built himself a hut; the Gospel of the day told how the disciples of Christ were to possess neither gold nor silver, nor scrip for their journey, nor two coats, nor shoes, nor a staff. Francis took these words as if spoken directly to himself, and as soon as Mass was over threw away the poor fragment left him of the world's goods, his shoes, cloak, pilgrim staff, and empty wallet. At last he had found his vocation. (from an article in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*)

Preparation for St. Francis was to lay down all his worldly possessions and let go of the controlling nature that seems to come with possessions: a desire for safety and security. The biblical image of putting on the whole armor of God for him was a lifestyle of simplicity and abandonment to the work he felt God calling him to do.

I invite you today, on behalf of the Spirit, to begin to find the work God is calling you to do – to begin the preparation for abandoning yourself to that wonderful work, using your unique gifts. The result of not abandoning ourselves to this work is that we are not ready when the bridegroom comes and the moment of truth arrives. Today you can begin to let go or let go a little more than you have of what may be holding you back from the fullness of life, what may be keeping you from experiencing the reality of God's life here and now.

The work of the church, wherever you find it, is to help each of us learn the skills of abandonment, of letting go. This work is what we do here and I invite you to come and grow with us. Ironically, Francis of Assisi ultimately found his greatest security in abandonment and his greatest abundance in letting go. His prayer is a call to each of us and to all of us together.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.
Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be
consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.