

PUTTING LOVE FIRST

Psalm 131; Matthew 6:24-34

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life... (Matt. 6:25). Who is he kidding? Is this a joke? If so, it is a bad joke because we all worry. I worry. I may not look like it but I am in a state of ambient anxiety all the time. I work hard at being a non-anxious presence, but I worry. That's what the W. in my name stands for "Worryin' Warren" Matthew Broadbent. Last week Mariah Callison told me she worries all the time, but when she finally got a chance to preach her first sermon – there was no worry. She enjoyed the whole process, she said. No worry! No anxiety whatever!

Frankly, I was jealous. I worry about my sermon every Sunday – for 36 years now. Susana will tell you that when I emerge from my office on Friday with a completed manuscript I throw up my hands and shout –“God is good! Another week! Another sermon!” Or sometimes, I say, “Well, at least I have something written down. I’ll wait a day and see if it preaches.”

Oh how we worry. Why do we worry? Maybe it is because we know too much, the better the education the greater the worry. I read the story of a man who took his seven year old daughter to Disney World and they went on all the rides, had a ball. When she was eight years old they went again. As they waited in line to get on a roller coaster, the little girl read the warning signs explaining all of the dangers posted on the entry way. She turned to her father and said, “Dad, I don’t want to do this anymore.” Her father looked at her and said, “But, last year you loved this ride.” She replied, “This year I can read.”

Worry. Worry. We all worry. We went around the table at Bible Study and shared our worries: health, our children (even if they are in their fifties by now), money, loneliness, retirement, the cycling violence of our world. There is a lot to be worried about, but there was one common thread. What we worry about is what we cannot control. W.R. Inge said, “Worry is interest paid on trouble before it comes due.”

When Jesus spoke the Sermon on the Mount he was speaking to people who had no control over their life. They were not wealthy people who had slaves and servants to meet their daily needs, to cook their food and wash their clothes, clean their houses and carry them to appointments. They were not like most of us who are dependent on other people to provide us services. These were the servants and slaves who did all those things for others. They worked for their day’s bread. If they didn’t work their families didn’t eat. They lived in a land occupied by a voracious Roman empire that sought their money for taxes and their sons for the army, and in return offered protection from chaos.

It was an existential crisis. These people were forced to trade their sense of self for Caesar’s security. They had a lot of worries. They were out of control of their lives, out of control of their community, their history and their traditions. The temple in Jerusalem was co-opted for economic benefit, its priests corrupted by Roman authority.

This was the context to which Jesus spoke. These people knew the common wisdom of survival. Keep your head down and pay your taxes. Obey the laws, Roman laws and Torah. If you live a righteous life you *might* be rewarded, and since we understand reward in monetary terms we tend to focus on the money because we have some control over wealth. We can work

hard, save our coins, build a nest egg. We can make decisions about our relationships. You are a friend and you are an enemy. I am angry with you so I won't have anything to do with you until you do what I want you to do. I can divorce you, you know. Damn it, don't get in my way. You have heard it said, "an eye for an eye." Well, I will take two of yours for every one of mine.

This was the common wisdom. It still sounds like common wisdom. The only way to control your life is to protect yourself from those who would take advantage of you. Beat them to the punch. Know that if you strike me first, the retaliation will be ten-fold. The one who wins the game is the one with more chips, or the more toys, or more money. It's all about power. If I have power, I have control. I win.

But I say to you [Jesus says] turn the other cheek, give alms gratefully, share your money, respect women, don't curse with God's name, pray earnestly but not to show off, and know the difference between treasure on earth and treasure in heaven. You can't have it both ways. You can't serve two masters. I am turning the conventional wisdom on its head. Now, tell me, what does it look like with their feet in the air and their robes fallen about their heads on the ground? What do you see?

And this is when 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?* And then, it is as if he looks out the window at the fields of red poppies, not unlike our orange California poppies, spread across the landscape. Is anything more beautiful? Or what about our golden, dried, dusty hillsides that turn a luscious green in the winter rains? How long will our dimpled hills hold their vibrant color before they turn gold, then brown, and become fuel for wildfires? Does God worry about these things?

The word "worry" is a concept, according to Craddock, that "translates a Greek term having the base meaning 'split attention' or divided concern." The word appears six times in this text, which suggest there are endless opportunities to split our attention between what is most important, and what is less important, between what deserves our greatest attention, and what we need to let go. And yet everyday we find a way to worry about the least important things in life.

Larry Patten is Methodist minister and writer in the Northwest. He wrote of leaving his rural home to go to an appointment only to be stuck at a railroad crossing waiting on what seemed like the west coast's slowest train?

"I glanced at my rear view mirror and spotted a guy approach and abruptly brake. He sat alone in a wide cab. A delivery truck, maybe. Even before he completely stopped, his face contorted in anger. He slammed the cab's ceiling with his fist. Once. Twice. And again. Though I had no idea what prompted his anger, his blatant displays of agitation and disgust continued over the next few moments.

"But only for a few moments.

"Though the train traveled with the haste of a turtle bored with speed," wrote Patten, "after my arrival it took about seven minutes for the last car to rattle through the intersection. The warning lights ceased flashing; the crossing guard gates swiveled skyward. Seven minutes max. 420 seconds.

"And yet how troubled the fellow behind me seemed. How do we describe it sometimes? He was 'beside himself.' Or 'not himself.' His troubles made him act like a caged animal inside his truck." And all this anxiety for 420 seconds. Can his anger recapture those seven minutes? *And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?*

Let me take this discussion to another level by sharing another translation of verse 6:25. The key word here is the word for life – *psyche* – which is the Greek word for soul, which is the

essential and eternal quality embodied in the physical being, but transcending physical limitation. Thus, I could translate this verse this way: *Through this I am saying, "Do not be anxious for your soul, about what you may be eating, or drinking, and the body for what you are wearing. For is not the soul more than [material] nourishment, and the body more than clothing?"*

It is of the soul that we are speaking. Everyone knows that we need food, clothing, shelter. The earth provides us with all these things. We have all the resources we need to live our physical existence (soma). In fact the only lack we have of these things is due to poor management on our part, corrupt politics that hoard wealth in the few, and bad theology that misrepresents God. Traditional theology says that God is in control of everything, with creation having no power. Creation is essentially a machine, a tool to be exploited. God is an Engineer – Deus ex machine - who has created the perfect world, and given it to us to care for. The implied imperative is "Don't mess it up, people." God is omnipotent, and knows what you are doing. Beware. Be fearful. Divine power is coercive and violent. Read about Pharaoh, or Noah, or the tower of Babel, Sodom and Gomorrah. God is a Dictator, a Warrior, an Emperor, ruler of the universe.

By extension, to emulate God human beings may use coercive power. That's how kings got away with it for centuries, and as we have witnessed in recent years, an ultimate religious act can often be an act of violence. This is the patriarchal world where domination is the rule. Male over female, master over slave, adult over child, rich over poor, human over creation, Father God over the world. This is the world-view of traditional theology that perpetuates a world filled with fear and anxiety, and feeds the cycle of violence.

Jesus says, "I will turn the conventional wisdom of power politics on its head. Now, tell me, what does it look like? What do you see? Where is the soul in all this deep anxiety? *Seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (Matt 6:33)*. If God is love, then put love first. This is where you will touch the soul.

Why do we keep this world view? What do we get out of it? A false sense of control? At least somebody is in charge, we can't live with chaos. Jesus tried to tip this worldview upside down over 2,000 years ago and we are just catching up with him.

Traditional theology was based on an out-moded view of the world of substances. Science teaches us that the world is not a machine, it is an organism, living in relationship with other organisms and systems of connections. We are caught up in this amazing luminous web of life that flexes and grows, and dies, and is reborn in new forms. True power is not coercive, but persuasive. Cells divide and are attracted to other cells forming new expressions of life. God is not finished but evolving, becoming. God is relational and in the process the soul is becoming known. Seek first your relationship with God, put love first, the rest will fall in place.

This does not mean that we will not have worries and anxiety. This is part of our makeup, just don't make more of them than you need to. Worry asks "What if tomorrow and tomorrow is..." which is exactly the question that takes us away from the godly now where we can know joy and gratitude if we can but trust in the Creator of all, who is also the God of the Moment. Put love first and treasure this day. Seek God's abiding place and lodge your hearts in wonder. Trust this love relationship with the simplicity and joy of the psalmist (131):

*God, my heart is not lifted up,
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child
that is with me.*

*[O People], hope in God
from this time on and forevermore.*