

FREEDOM FROM WORRY

Matthew 6:25-34

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Avon Lake UCC
29 March 2020
(online worship only)

It has NEVER been easy not to worry. Worrying is a part of the human condition. Obviously it was a part of life in Jesus' time. Otherwise, why would he mention it?

"Do not worry," he says in our passage for today. It was probably a spring day in Galilee, because Jesus points to the flowers growing on the hillside. "Do not worry," he says to the crowds who have gathered, some of whom are hearing him for the first time and some of whom have been following him everywhere. "Don't be so worried about what you have to eat or drink or wear," Jesus tells them, but here's what we know about Jesus' followers. Most of them were poor. Most Galileans at the time of Jesus were poor. Many of those listening to Jesus probably had reason to feel anxious about having enough food.

"Do not worry." Freedom from worry. I chose this topic months ago, because, in recent years, anxiety has become a companion to so many people I know. Little did I know how appropriate this topic would be for all of us at the end of March. "Do not worry."

I will tell you that I am worried. I worry about my parents, who live in Columbus; they are 89 and 84 and my mom has some health concerns. At the same time, I'm grateful for a brother who lives nearby who is taking good care of them.

I worry about my son. He decided around Christmas time that he wanted to do some volunteer work with the families of inmates at Rikers Prison in New York; I was proud of him and shared in his excitement. He took a three-month leave of absence from his job in Chicago and moved to New York City at the beginning of March - his

plan was to stay in New York from March through May. He's currently in Queens, which has over 3500 confirmed cases of coronavirus.

I worry about my stepdaughter who's a nurse and my brother-in-law who's a doctor.

I worry about our parishioners - those who are ill, of course. Medical care providers on the front line and first responders. Those who live with addictions and can't attend 12 step meetings in person. Those who already were experiencing high levels of anxiety.

I worry about those who are most vulnerable - those who are homeless, those who are barely hanging on financially.

I worry about how this will affect our church in many ways over the long haul.

I am not immune from worrying.

Yet I hear Jesus say, "Do not worry," and I listen. I know that Jesus did not have an easy life, so he doesn't say these words lightly. Not only did he live in a time when many people were struggling economically, but his was an era of political and religious upheaval and he was smack dab in the middle of it. Jesus had reason to worry. His enemies weren't hiding; they were in plain sight.

Jesus reminds us that worry doesn't help anything. "Who among you," he asks, "by worrying can add a single moment to your life?" In fact, we know the opposite is true. Worry not only makes our days less pleasant, it makes them shorter. Living with extreme tension takes a physical toll and can lead to early death.

Worry's best friend is fear, and fear paralyzes us. Perhaps we're not so much worried about ourselves but about others, but when we're trapped in worry and fear, we can't do anything to help anyone else. Worry keeps us inwardly-focused; it continually

feeds on itself. Worry for others may feel like love, but worry doesn't act like love.

Worry doesn't act at all.

One of the most difficult aspects of our current crisis is that so much of it is unknown. How bad will things become? How long will this period of distancing last? We're all living in a kind of suspended limbo and it's a very helpless feeling. Jesus has something to say about this, too. It's the last verse of our passage for today:

"Therefore, stop worrying about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." Does that advice sound like it was written just for us, just for now? It does to me.

Worry keeps us from living fully in this present moment. Sometimes it keeps us from appreciating the beauty in the moment, and sometimes it keeps us from doing the things that are ours to do where we are, in the present.

We know that Jesus is right. Worry isn't any good for us, emotionally, spiritually or physically. It doesn't help anything; in fact, it keeps us from offering helpful support to one another. But how? How do we keep from worrying?

This is Jesus' answer: "Put first things first. Focus on God's priorities." Some of you may have grown up singing this verse, from the King James Version, in Sunday School or Vacation Bible School or church camp: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and God's righteousness. And all these things will be added unto you." What does it look like to put God's priorities first? It means focusing first on this question, "What is the loving thing to do right now, right here?" Love is what keeps us closest to God, for love is at the heart of God. God IS love. There is always something loving we can do, in any situation. One of the silver linings of our current crisis is that there are examples everywhere of people showing love and acting in kindness. The imperative to love extends to ourselves as well. This is a time to show compassion to ourselves, to check

in with ourselves, to reflect on how we're doing and what we need...you probably need more rest right now; I know I do. You may need to remind yourself of the beauty in the world by listening to your favorite music or taking one of the free virtual art museum tours or by walking outside and observing the earth coming back to life.

The writer Elizabeth Gilbert talks about how fear can cripple her creativity, so she says this, "Fear, I know I can't get rid of you completely, but you are staying in the back seat of the car. You're not driving this vehicle. You can have a voice, but you can't have a vote."

What if we said that to our worries? There's no way we will be able to be completely free of worries, but let's distance ourselves from them. Make love your co-pilot and keep worry away from the steering wheel.

When I was on study leave in January, I read a memoir of a man who spent 40 years in solitary confinement for a crime he did not commit. It was fascinating in many regards, but I want to share with you what he learned about living in the most extreme adversity one can imagine. He made a decision, early on, that he would not allow his spirit, his soul, his mind to be imprisoned. More extraordinary, he made a decision to not become bitter, because he knew that bitterness would just become one more form of captivity.

He writes, "I got so I could sit in one spot in the cell and feel the physical limitations of it yet know that my mind and emotions were unlimited. I knew I was unlimited." He decided to look for the good in each person and each situation, to limit his exposure to negative conversation, and to maintain a disciplined schedule in his cell - cleaning up, reading, and exercising. He also was able to do good for others. In the one hour a day that they were given to converse with each other through their bars, he

taught the prisoner in the cell across from him to read. Whenever their rights were violated, he would help his fellow prisoners to band together and demand changes.

I want to read to you a quote from his chapter entitled, "Maturity." "By the time I was 40 I had transformed my cell, which was supposed to be a confined space of destruction and punishment, into something positive. I used that space to educate myself, I used that space to build strong moral character, I used that space to develop principles and a code of conduct, I used that space for everything other than what my captors intended it to be...I'd developed a moral compass that was unbreakable, a strong sense of what was right or wrong... I knew that my life was the result of a conscious choice I made every minute of the day. A choice to make myself better. A choice to make things better for others. I helped other prisoners understand they had value as human beings, that they were worth something...In my forties, I chose to take my pain and turn it into compassion, and not hate. I still had moments of bitterness and anger. But by then I had the wisdom to know that bitterness and anger are destructive. I was dedicated to building things, not tearing them down...By age 40 I had learned that to be human is to grow, to create, to contribute, and that fear stops growth."

Here is what I glean from those words for us at this moment: our external circumstances are not in complete control. We have had some of our freedoms taken away, and we have experienced losses and disappointments, but we still have choices about how we will cope and live. We can tell worry to take the back seat. We will choose love.

I want to close with this poem, written two weeks ago by an Irish priest named Richard Kendrick. It's entitled, "Lockdown."

Lockdown

Yes there is fear.

Yes there is isolation.

Yes there is panic buying.

Yes there is sickness.

Yes there is even death.

But,

They say that in Wuhan after so many years of noise

You can hear the birds again.

They say that after just a few weeks of quiet

The sky is no longer thick with fumes

But blue and grey and clear.

They say that in the streets of Assisi

People are singing to each other

across the empty squares,

keeping their windows open

so that those who are alone

may hear the sounds of family around them.

They say that a hotel in the West of Ireland

Is offering free meals and delivery to the housebound.

Today a young woman I know

is busy spreading fliers with her number

through the neighbourhood

So that the elders may have someone to call on.

Today Churches, Synagogues, Mosques and Temples

are preparing to welcome

and shelter the homeless, the sick, the weary

All over the world people are slowing down and reflecting

All over the world people are looking at their neighbours in a new way

All over the world people are waking up to a new reality

To how big we really are.

To how little control we really have.

To what really matters.

To Love.

So we pray and we remember that

Yes there is fear.

But there does not have to be hate.

Yes there is isolation.

But there does not have to be loneliness.

Yes there is panic buying.

But there does not have to be meanness.

Yes there is sickness.

But there does not have to be disease of the soul

Yes there is even death.

But there can always be a rebirth of love.

Wake to the choices you make as to how to live now.

Today, breathe.

Listen, behind the factory noises of your panic

The birds are singing again

The sky is clearing,

Spring is coming,

And we are always encompassed by Love.

Open the windows of your soul

And though you may not be able

to touch across the empty square,

Sing.

*Note: The book referenced is Solitary, by Albert Woodfox