

Do Not Be Worried
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Matthew 6:24-34

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Hearing today's Gospel for the hundredth time at least, many of us may have the following reactions: To the first part about how you cannot serve two masters; you cannot serve God and wealth – we may think – so, you have to choose – if you love God, you have to reject wealth. God good, money bad! To the second part, about the lilies of the field and so forth, we may respond – oh sure, don't worry, be happy!

And we perhaps dismiss the passage because it seems to expect two impossible things from us: disregarding the power of money and ridding ourselves of anxiety or worry. It seems to be saying, "Just have faith" – and that too seems impossible. Isn't faith a gift, not an enterprise?

How might this passage reach through our initial resistance and touch us where it matters and really become gospel for us?

First the money part – it doesn't say wealth is bad, or incompatible with loving God. Jesus is telling us that wealth should not be an end in itself, that money should be a resource we use to meet basic needs and live out our values. Most of us recognize obscene displays of wealth. Perhaps we've known times when money seemed the most important thing in life – money would make us happy. We've seen lives devoted to making more and more money to the point that nothing else matters – family, free time, relaxation, hobbies – all are given up at the altar of wealth. Jesus' caution about this is right on. It's not the money, but the worry about money, making money an ultimate concern that is wrong – sinful.

And this leads into the next part of the passage – about worry in general – the kind of anxiety that can cripple us and have us live in fear – the kind of worry that can rob our lives of vitality and delight.

Here Jesus speaks to something so contemporary, so close to our own worlds, both private and public. I am gripped by what he has to say. I ask myself, as perhaps we all might – am I convicted here? Do my worries and anxieties have too much power? Are they a threat to faith? Are we also, like Jesus' hearers, people of little faith?

It would be hard, I think, to hear these words of Jesus right now in the Irawaddy Delta in Burma or amidst the earthquake devastation in China. Worries about food and clothing and basic survival there are very real and totally justified. God will provide, but only through the help of others. It has been so frustrating to see that help denied and held back in Burma, even as it is inspiring to see the Chinese helping their own people in this chaos. I guess if faith were to be an antidote in those situations, it would be faith in the power of human compassion and love of neighbor, and, for religious people, the source of that compassion would be a God of love.

But for us, who are not in extreme need just to survive, don't Jesus' words resound differently? When are our anxieties unwarranted, and, if faith makes a difference, how so?

Here is what Helen Keller said about our craving for security and the anxiety that goes along with it: “Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature or in the children of men. The fearful are caught as often as the brave. Faith alone defends.”

I think she is right about security. Although there are many, many prudent things we can do to protect ourselves from illness, or poverty or other misfortunes, we can never guarantee well-being for ourselves or our children or anyone else. Absolute security does not exist in nature. It’s good to enhance security; it’s idolatry to believe it’s a reality we can create.

And so – “faith alone defends”, “do not worry.” How do we take this counsel to heart and really trust it? One of the times in my life when I was the most worried, the most anxious, was after I had left St. Mark’s and was doing interim work in 1997 and 1998 before coming here. I had applied and not been chosen by several parishes, and I had no idea what my future would be in the church. I knew my marriage was in trouble; I knew I needed to be able to support myself. I didn’t feel called to interim ministry. I knew I wanted to go to a congregation and stay to fall in love with that church and do the work I felt given to do. I felt as close to depression as I’ve ever felt, as I worried incessantly about where I would land and how my life would play out.

One morning, at a weekday service at St. Alban’s, my friend Eugene Sutton (now Bishop-elect of Maryland) read a passage from Matthew that comes soon after today’s gospel. It was this: “Ask and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake?” (Mt. 7:7-10) I choked up as he read – it seemed so clear – just as a loving parent will not, cannot, refuse the real need of a child, so our own asking, our own knocking on the door of life, will not go unheeded by a loving God.

If God is love, then love’s response to our asking and our knocking is giving and opening – not necessarily in the ways we hope or expect, but in ways that do sustain us. How could I, a child of God, consume myself with worry that I, needing good work and open to possibility, would end up with nothing? I found that reading from Matthew, and today’s as well, to be assurances from Jesus that God is indeed faithful in God’s love for us.

And so, our own faith in response is needed. And, I hasten to add, faith certainly doesn’t always seem to be rewarded. Good people, praying, faithful people can end up with nothing. Doors are slammed shut. Our own faith, such as it is, or isn’t, doesn’t seem to guarantee security. But, as Helen Keller says, “Faith alone defends.” I think it is faith in the face of insecurity, faith alongside our worries, that can keep our troubles in perspective and keep us, when our troubles are catastrophic, from despair, from falling apart. Thin ice here – some horrors and tragedies eclipse anything we can say or understand.

But faith, seeking, asking and knocking and trusting in a loving response, is still worth it. Otherwise, we let worry rule; we let anxiety win. It’s a bad way to live, as a person or as a country.

And, on this Memorial Day weekend, when we honor all those who have died in service to our country, we might reflect with special care on what it must be like for all who risk themselves in war. What huge worries are unavoidable for them and those who love them! What faith holds them together and keeps the dark night of anxiety from overwhelming? "Faith only defends."

I close with an excerpt from a poem by James Gilbert. It also points to a way of living beyond the grasp of worry and despair.

A Brief for the Defense

Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere. If babies are not starving someplace, they are starving somewhere else. With flies in their nostrils. But we enjoy our lives because that's what God wants. Otherwise the mornings before summer dawn would not be made so fine. The Bengal tiger would not be fashioned so miraculously well. The poor women at the fountain are laughing together between the suffering they have known and the awfulness in their future, smiling and laughing while somebody in the village is very sick. There is laughter every day in the terrible streets of Calcutta, and the women laugh in the cages of Bombay. If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction, we lessen the importance of their deprivation. We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure, but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world. To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the Devil. If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down, we should give thanks that the end had magnitude. We must admit there will be music despite everything...

Amen.