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From the Pulpit

Sermon: “In the Palms of God’s Hands”
The Rev. Dr. Jim Bennett ~ February 27, 2011

Matthew 6:24-34

Often when we encounter a biblical text, the first challenge is to escape our modern world and place ourselves in a biblical context very different than our own. But this text doesn't require us to stretch ourselves very far. It doesn't take much imagination to understand a world where worry prevails. We live in a culture of anxiety. We are bombarded by a consumer culture that feeds on that anxiety: you should be worried about this problem, but if you just buy this product, you'll have enough so you don't need to worry anymore—until, of course, the next problem comes along. And while this is troubling enough, anxiety also seems to have become one of the primary products of our educational system.

Last month here at Sunnyvale Presbyterian Church, we screened the documentary film “Race to Nowhere,” which shockingly detailed the anxiety and stress that our test-score obsessed culture has created for our youth and children.

That same week, the results of national college survey were released showing college students are experiencing record levels of stress.

It has become commonplace to internalize a sense that our basic orientation in life ought to be one of worry. Our text today confronts and challenges this claim, critiquing the world of worry, and offers an alternative to anxiety.

“Do not worry” is the refrain that Jesus repeats throughout today’s reading.

Now, as much as this is supposed to be a comfort, I'll the first to admit how hard it is to hear. For people like me it is as much challenge and critique as it is comfort. See, I've adapted quite well to the culture of anxiety. It's my acknowledged role in our family, and they often chastise me for it: “Dad, why do you have to worry so much?” To which my response is often, “because somebody needs to worry about these things.” I've bought into the system and elevated it to the next level: if I'm not anxious something must be wrong; or, if I can just worry enough, then everything will be alright! And then comes Jesus' challenge: “do not worry.” To which the response of people like me is: “great, now I have to worry about how I'm not supposed to worry...”

Though I hope that I'm alone in this cycle of anxiety, I suspect that I'm not. And in this worldview where worry is so prominent, Jesus words are difficult to hear, because he's not saying "don't sweat the small stuff" he's saying let go of your biggest anxieties.

But what Jesus is talking about here, even more than the problem of anxiety or the role of money, is what it means to be a faithful disciple, to seek God's kingdom and God's righteousness. It's not easy to live a life of faithful obedience to Jesus. But as much as this passage is a critique of the world and the way we live in it, in the end it does offer words of comfort and consolation: When we make God our bedrock foundation, when we orient our lives to be followers of Jesus, we eliminate both the cause and the consequences of the anxiety that pervades our world and that can paralyze our lives.

The first of Jesus' calls not to worry emerges directly that oft quoted verse that begins "you cannot serve two masters . . ." and concludes "you cannot serve God and wealth," or as it is often translated, "you cannot serve God and Mammon."

Put in these stark terms, the choice is between wealth and worry on one side, and God and freedom on the other. In a world that trumpets "you can have it all" it can be difficult to concede this is an either/or decision. But this is exactly Jesus' point. We can only have one fundamental orientation. Trying to orient our lives toward both acquisition and God is to be pulled in opposition directions, and thus not go anywhere. It is, in the words of one Biblical Scholar, to suffer "spiritual schizophrenia." In the messy reality of our lives this can be a difficult choice to make, but consider the striking contrast between the two alternatives:

On the one side is the way of Mammon: making the foundation of our safety and security economic gain and the acquisition of material goods. But this orientation causes the worry that Jesus challenges us to abandon. We are imperfect and flawed creatures, so turning around and relying on solely on our own efforts as the basis of our security and comfort is, from the outset, a sure recipe for anxiety and worry. By our very nature we can never have enough to provide the sense of absolute assurance that we seek. So the more we accumulate, the more we come to rely on acquisition as the source of our well-being, and it never stops. In the end it doesn't matter whether we are rich or poor, or whether we think we need just a little more or a lot—it's the orientation rather than the amount that matters. And soon the worry is plaguing us from both sides, because the more we focus on accumulating, the more anxiety we have about losing what we've got!

[I was struck by a full-page newspaper ad I saw this week that warned if you didn't buy this particular product all your hard earned wealth could be lost! It didn't matter what other protection you had, without this you would be in great danger. In fact, the bold typeface across the top warned, in just the time it took to read the ad, 79 people had had their credit stolen and their lives ruined. So act now, before it's too late! Once you do, the ad suggested, your worries will be gone.

Of course, what the ad didn't mention is that tomorrow there will be a new way to lose it all, and then you will undoubtedly need to buy another form of protection...]

The Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, once defined anxiety as "the next day." We don't know what will happen "the next day," which creates anxiety this day. Therefore, we are

consumed on this day with trying to anticipate future calamities against which to protect ourselves. Since there is no end to the calamities we can anticipate, we're always uncertain and constantly chasing after something which, we hope, will decrease our level of uncertainty. But we never find it.

The result is a vicious cycle of anxiety and worry. To the extent that we orient ourselves away from God and rely on ourselves, we will be plagued by worry and will be, as Jesus charges, people of little faith.

And the problem is not just the way we destroy ourselves, but also the way we corrupt our relation to all of God's creation when we choose this path:

If we are driven by acquisition, then we are caught up in a cycle of perpetually seeking more, a race that inevitably puts in competition with others and in opposition to creation. This orientation assumes a model of scarcity, putting us in conflict with both creation and community. It creates a zero sum game where our own acquisition and well-being come at the expense of another's. We need to acquire resources before someone else does, lest we lose out, which, of course, only increases our anxiety.

To be anxious in this way is to keep the focus on ourselves, instead of on God, and instead of on others. As we worry about meeting our own needs, we betray Jesus' call to trust in God alone and we become blind to the needs of others.

And so Jesus reminds us that there is another way

When we confess that Jesus is Lord, making God our bedrock foundation and our fundamental orientation, then we turn our back not only on the way of the world—the way of seeking comfort in the accumulation of things—but we also turn our back to the way of worry and anxiety. We no longer live in a way that makes our lives dependent on our own efforts. Instead, we lean into the abundant and unending grace of God's love.

A path pointed toward God's grace operates according to an entirely different logic than the human economy; it trades a presumption of scarcity that leads to competition for the assurance of sufficiency that is manifest in community. Unlike accumulated goods which are always at risk of being lost, to ground ourselves in God's love is to tap into riches that will never fail, that run no risk of disappearing, and that can be shared without the possibility of decreasing our share.

While the things of the world are finite, the breadth of God's love is just the opposite. It is like the love of a parent for a child, in which it is not a zero-sum game, but the amount of love actually expands to meet the demand [time and energy may be another matter, but love, there's enough of that to go around]

Therefore do not worry, Jesus assures, because when you choose God as Lord, you leave behind the pursuits (for things for perfection,) that are the source of anxiety, but you also rely on a store of grace and love that will never run and that can never be lost.

And the benefits of this letting go extend well beyond our own individual health and spiritual well-being.

With this freedom from anxiety comes the freedom, as Jesus commands us, to seek the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness. The time and energy that worry and anxiety so rapidly consume can be redirected outward. Anxiety and worry keep us focused on ourselves, whereas letting go fundamentally reorients ourselves away from our own selfish needs to recognize the needs for others. The experience of grace that breaks through our own needs to shine a light on the needs of others can radically transform our view of the world.

John Winthrop was the leader and long-time governor of the first Puritans who settled in Boston in the 1630s. As governor he was not known for his liberality or charity. One winter a man complained to Winthrop that a "needy person" was stealing from the man's woodpile. Winthrop demanded the thief be brought before him. Those in attendance expected impose an appropriately stringent Puritan penalty on the man for his transgressions. But Winthrop told the thief that since he seemed to be short on wood that winter, he was free to help himself to Winthrop's pile until winter had ended. Winthrop then turned to those present and asked if he had not cured the thief of stealing!¹

To quiet the often deafening demands of own desires is to create space to hear the cries of others. And in this regard, it's important to consider what the text does not say. The command not to worry about ourselves is not a command to ignore whether others do not have enough to eat. In fact, it is just the opposite: If one thing is clear about Jesus' ministry, it is that he feeds everyone. In fact, in first part of the chapter we read today he has instructed followers to pray for daily bread. Jesus loved to eat and he was constantly making sure everyone else had enough to eat too! And we should do likewise—a task that is much easier to do, Jesus suggests, when we can look away from our own desires so we can see the basic needs of food and clothing that are far too prevalent in our world.

Later in Matthew's gospel, in a striking parallel to our text today, Jesus will make this very point. He will echo the worries about food and drink and clothing, saying that the ability to see these needs in others will characterize the Kingdom of God: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink....I was naked and you clothed me" (Matthew 25:35-36)

Now I'm not suggesting that following God is a cure to money problems, nor is it assurance that food or clothing won't ever be a struggle; but the quest for wealth is no guarantee either, as our ongoing economic turmoil has made so clear. And Jesus concedes as much as well, when he acknowledges that "tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

But if we frame the worries that trouble us today within the larger framework that our fundamental orientation is toward the grace of God rather than the wealth of the world, then we can face those worries with the confidence of a people held in the palms of God's hands.

¹ Sarah Vowell, *The Wordy Shipmates*, pp. 47-48.