

Betsey Moe
Sermon 5.30.10
“Carefree Christianity and Other Myths”

First Scripture: Matthew 6:25-34

25“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? 26Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ 32For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

Second Scripture: Matthew 16:24-28

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? 27“For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. 28Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

In September of 1988 – the week I turned 15 – an unlikely song hit #1. It was an a cappella song, the first a cappella song to hit the charts, and it sounded like this: (Play a clip of “Don’t worry; be happy.”) “Don’t worry, be happy” by Bobby McFerrin swept its way into pop culture. Evidently, it struck a nerve in our driven, high-anxiety lives, because you couldn’t get away from it if you wanted to; it blared out of car radios, on restaurant patios, out of boomboxes that people supposedly carried on their shoulders in 1988. The song, even though the lyrics weren’t profound, was like a drug; you could listen to it while you were stuck on the freeway or stressed out while making dinner and feel a sense of escape. For those two or three minutes, you could take a mini-vacation and picture yourself on a beach with a Mai Tai in hand.

Fast forward to 1995 – a movie hit the theaters with an equally catchy tune in its soundtrack. It was Disney’s *The Lion King* – and here’s one of its most memorable songs: (Play clip from “Hakuna Matata.”) Hakuna Matata, the Swahili phrase meaning “no worries.” Simba, the main lion character, has witnessed his father’s death and thinks that he is at fault. Instead of staying in his homeland and becoming the next king, which would have been the responsible thing to do, he runs away into the jungle and meets two new friends who convince him to let go of his past and embrace a lifestyle of “Hakuna Matata” – no worries. Again, judging from the song’s ensuing

popularity, it seems that the concept struck that same nerve in our society. Sometimes, you just need to forget about being responsible. Sit back, enjoy life, because life is short.

At first glance, it would seem that these two songs could have been songs on the soundtrack for the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says, “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?” Don’t worry! These are soothing words to people in a culture like ours who have stress-related health issues. Being a carefree Christian sounds great, but somehow it doesn’t sound like Jesus.

I mean, would we dare repeat these words to the mother in Haiti who starves so that her children may eat? Would we ever say these words to a street kid in Honduras who has no shoes, who sniffs glue to curb his hunger? How could Jesus possibly call us to a life of leisure, of no worries, when there is great need in the world around us?

Besides, in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus seems to be ratcheting up responsibility for our behavior, not letting us off the hook. And not long after the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus would say, “Let any who want to become my followers deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me,” which sounds like the opposite of leading an anxiety-free life.

So what *does* the “Do not worry” passage mean? If it is not saying “Don’t worry – be happy” or “Hakuna Matata,” what is it saying? I think that Jesus *does* want us to let go of anxiety. But as we move through the whole passage, Jesus clarifies what letting go of worry means. I think he makes three significant moves – three clarifications – that help us understand what the Christian life of “no worries” looks like.

His first clarification comes through his object lesson: he says that the very reason we need not worry is that God is active in this world. God is the one who feeds the birds, who clothes the lilies; God has not left alone those that God created – from the most insignificant-seeming bird to you and me and the mother in Haiti and the child in Honduras. This is a radically different way of looking at the world than we are used to. Some philosophers have seen God as a master clockmaker who set dynamic patterns and systems into place and then stepped back and watched it tick. In this worldview, *we* are the ones who make money, and with *our* money, we buy our own groceries, pay for our own rent or a mortgage, buy our kids shoes, pay for vacations. We can fool ourselves into thinking that we have control of every aspect of our lives. We forget that all we have comes from God, and that God cares enough about us to not abandon us like a grand clockmaker. “Do not worry,” Jesus tells his disciples, because *God* is our loving provider.

This last week, our dear friends from Montana stayed with us, as they have once a month for the past two years, while their daughter was treated for Leukemia at the Children’s Hospital. This was her last monthly visit before beginning her maintenance check-ups. I asked her mom, who is my age, how she got through the initial shock of finding out her daughter had cancer, how she coped with the anxiety. She said, “I didn’t worry like I would have imagined people did in the same situation. It was immediately apparent that our lives were out of our control and totally in God’s hands. The day-to-day stuff was hard, but worry wasn’t an issue.”

When we realize that God is active in the world and cares deeply for us, worry has no chance. That is the first claim Jesus makes to clarify what he means.

Next, Jesus tells his disciples to shift the focus of what they work for. “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness” Jesus says, and all these things (meaning basic provisions) will be added to you as well.” We get this one backwards, too. A life without worry, a life of leisure, is, ironically, not what we are to strive for. A life free from worry will come when we strive for the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness. And what *is* the kingdom of God? What *is* God’s righteousness? It is not simply the afterlife – something to set our sights on so that the worries of this life fade into the background. The kingdom of God in Matthew is a way of life on earth marked by servanthood and self-denial, and, to be sure, it is filled with its share of suffering and hardship. It is a way of life that Jesus laid before us by walking it himself. And so striving for the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness is living like Jesus, focusing on others, even when it means sacrifice.

I worked at Camp Lutherhaven one summer in college. Some kids were harder than others to get to know, and sometimes I wondered on day two of camp if certain kids would not speak a word the whole week. We were talking about this at a staff meeting one night, when someone suggested we try something different at breakfast the next day. Each kid would have one hand secured behind her back; the other arm would be attached to a three-foot-long splint with a fork on the end. Each of us wouldn’t be able to feed ourselves, but we *could* feed the person across the table from us. If we wanted to be fed, we had to rely on each other. My cabin of girls came away from that meal not only laughing with each other, but with a new sense of connection to and reliance on each other. For me, this was a wonderful visual of what Jesus had in mind for humanity – a sweet interdependence on each other, all of us ultimately dependent on God, but also dependent on each other, with no one in power over another, no one “controlling” the resources, but all using what God has given to meet others’ basic needs.

When Jesus says not to worry, it is a call not to worry about our *own* food and our *own* clothes. The needs of others are a different story. The world Jesus envisions and sets into motion in the gospel of Matthew is a world in which everyone is fed and clothed by God, with all of us participating in feeding and clothing each other.

So, letting go of worry in this passage means remembering that God is active in the world and cares for us, and it also means striving for a kingdom way of life in which we care for one another.

To close the passage, Jesus makes one last clarification: he calls his disciples to focus on today. “Do not worry about tomorrow,” he says, “for tomorrow will bring worries of its own.” TODAY is all we have when it comes to living our faith, to striving after God’s kingdom and righteousness. Today, not tomorrow, is what we’ve got when it comes to feeding and clothing and serving other people. When we embrace today for the sake of God’s kingdom, there is no room for worry.

I have a friend who, in seminary, at age 30, had a mini heart attack while playing basketball. He was a changed person after that incident. He said, “I had convinced myself that these three years at seminary were preparation for ministry. Now I know that there is no guarantee of tomorrow. Ministry starts now.” After his heart attack, he invested deeply in his relationships with other students and with his professors, inviting people to lunch in the cafeteria and then lingering over theological conversations. After his heart attack, he treated his internship at a local church as *real* ministry, not as a place to “try out” his preaching. This way of living in the moment for the sake of the other is what God wants for us. My friend could have worried himself sick about his health; he could have entered a mode of self-protection and become *less* involved in the lives of others – but by seeing the value in each day, he was able to find peace and give his life away.

After reading the whole passage, we see our two scripture readings this morning are not mutually exclusive. We see that a life free of worry does not mean a life of leisure and escape. A life free of worry is not a self-engrossed life, a life without suffering or concern for others. But it is a life of peace and freedom. This life will come to us when we remember that God is active in our world and cares for us. It will come when we live for others and provide for their needs. And it will come when we live like this *today*, not waiting for some ideal opportunity for ministry to one day come to us.

I want to close by calling to mind what Jesus said in Matthew 11 – the same words we heard in the call to worship:

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.”