

Chapters 5-7 of Matthew's gospel are known as The Sermon on the Mount. In the section we've read today, Jesus addresses the pervasive and debilitating power of anxiety. Anxiety always seems to be nipping at my heels and sometimes it bites me pretty hard. But I don't think it's just me. Anxiety strikes people in every age and in every culture. It seems to be hard-wired into human nature, and it is flourishing among us now, these years of economic uncertainty, terrorism, climate change, and the political unrest across sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. There are many things which prompt anxiety within us. Jesus here speaks a word of good news that we need to hear again and again.

The origins of the words "anxiety" and "worry" paint a very descriptive picture of the effect they have on us. "Anxious" comes from the Latin root "ang" (even though anxious begins "anx", you can hear the "ang" when you pronounce it). That root "ang" has a basic meaning of narrow or restricted, which can be seen in the related words angle (a narrow part of a circle) and anger. When we feel anxiety or anger, the physical reaction is similar – our throat gets restricted and tight and we feel strangled (which also has the "ang" root in the midst of it.)

"Worry" comes from Old English and Middle English and also means to strangle – more specifically, to grasp by the throat with the teeth. It was used to describe the way wolves would attack sheep. From there it evolved to its more general meaning of "troubled" or "distressed."

At times when you feel anxious or worried, perhaps you have experienced this physical reaction of tightness in the throat, the sense of being metaphorically strangled or immobilized. You can't sleep, you can't focus at work, because anxiety has you in its grip.

Jesus speaks here to the basic human anxiety for survival needs: food and clothing. On the one hand, anxiety is like an itch; we can't simply decide to ignore it and think it will go away. However, these admonitions speak to the way we live, not just how we feel. The Greek verb for "to be anxious" (*merimnao*) is not just a feeling, but can also indicate an action, meaning "to put forth an effort" or "to strive after." The prohibition against anxiety may, therefore, be interpreted as an encouragement to start making decisions that are not controlled by anxiety. I think that is an important distinction: we can not simply will away the feeling of being anxious, but we can make a conscious effort to not let the feeling of anxiety dictate the decisions we make.

Jesus offers three reasons why his disciples should not allow anxiety to control them. First, he says, "life is more than food, and the body more than clothing." Now these are not words intended for all people in all circumstances. These words are not intended for persons who do not have enough to eat. When we read the rest of the gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry, it is inconceivable that Jesus would say to a person who has no food, "Well, remember that life is more than food" and walk away. Jesus speaks these words to his disciples, who at the moment had food to eat and clothes to wear, but were spending their time trying to acquire more. Jesus speaks truth to them: Life is more than the things we spend our lives seeking. We can be free from anxiety over what we have or do not have. Jesus' words refocus our energies on *who we are* rather than on *what we have*, and on *what we are becoming* rather than on *how we will get ahead*.

Jesus points to the birds and lilies for a second reason to not be anxious. He uses a common method of reasoning, arguing from the lesser to the greater: If God provides for the birds and the flowers, then God will much more certainly provide for us. Trusting that it is God's intention and purpose to provide our basic needs goes a long way toward freeing us from the grasp of anxiety.

The third reason Jesus gives the disciples for not allowing anxiety to control them is just common sense – being anxious can not and does not solve our problems. "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Since you cannot do something as little as that, why do you worry about the rest?"

Now some might suggest that Jesus is a little naïve about life, that this is basically the same message of the sugary-sweet little song by Bobby McFerrin twenty-some years ago, "Don't Worry, Be Happy." One line from that is, "In every life we have some trouble, when you worry you make it double, so don't worry, be happy." Or we might think it's the same advice as two of my favorite characters from *The Lion King*, Timon the meerkat and Pumbaa the warthog. They sing "*Hakuna Matata*" which in Swahili means "no worries for the rest of your life." Just forget your worries and troubles and start smiling and enjoying your present. The worries will automatically vanish away.

This type of carefree, “go with the flow” attitude is NOT what Jesus is advocating. Jesus is not naïve about the realities and struggles of life. He does not present “simply trust God to provide” as a substitute for careful planning, reasonable preparation, or hard work. What Jesus does say, in contrast to Bobby McFerrin, Timon and Pumbaa, is that we have a God who loves and provides for us and that when we place our trust in God rather than things, anxiety and worry lose their grip around our throats.

What Jesus suggests as an antidote for anxiety is “striving for the kingdom of God.” Jesus’ core message was that his ministry was a signal that the kingdom of God had begun on earth, right now. Many people hear the term “kingdom of God” and assume that it means heaven, which in their minds is a place we go to after we die. That is NOT what Jesus means by “kingdom of God.” The kingdom of God occurs wherever and whenever God’s will is done among us. That’s why in the Lord’s Prayer we pray “your kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven.” Therefore, when we love and serve our neighbor, we experience the kingdom. When two people or groups of people experience reconciliation, we experience the kingdom. When the community attends to the needs of the poor and powerless, we experience the kingdom. When we share the good news of God’s love for us, we experience the kingdom.

Jesus says, “Strive first for the kingdom of God, and all these things, these basic necessities, will be given to you as well.”

What changes would we make in our lives if we were as concerned about seeking God’s kingdom as we are about next month’s paycheck, or about our pension, or the next step up the career ladder? If we were to seek first God’s kingdom, what value would we give to reconciling broken relationships, sharing the gospel of God’s love, and working for peace and justice for all people?

Earlier in this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” This is very good news. Many people hear this and get it mixed up, thinking that Jesus says “where your heart is, there your treasure will be.” But Jesus says it the other way around: “where you put your treasure – that’s where your heart will end up.” The point isn’t that how we spend our money *reveals* what sort of people we *are*, but that how we spend our money *determines* what sort of people we *become*. (Powell)

Let’s remember that “treasure” is not necessarily “money.” Our treasure is whatever we value – in many cases that is our money, but it is also our time and our possessions and our families and our physical bodies. Whatever we value, that is our treasure. And Jesus says that what we do with our treasure affects our hearts—it determines who we are inside. It determines what sort of people we become.

This may sound scary, but it is actually very good news. Jesus says we can control our hearts, we can control anxiety and worry, by deciding what sort of people we want to be, and then giving our treasure—our time, our talents, and our money—to those things that we want to care about.

Jesus was not a fund-raiser. He talks about money and possessions a lot, but not because he wants people to give to any particular cause. He talks about money because he cares about us and because he knows that what we do with our money and possessions affects who we are spiritually.

One of Jeff Whitmill’s many anthems, and in my opinion, one of his best ones, is called *Libera Nos* – a prayer that begins “Liberate us” or “Deliver us”. Today, in closing, I’d like to you simply listen to this prayer and make it your own:

Deliver us, Lord, from ev’ry evil,
and grant us peace in our day.
In your mercy keep us free from sin
and protect us from all anxiety.

Now and forevermore.
The peace of the Lord be with you always,
Now and forever. Amen.