

“Don’t Worry – easier said than done.”
Isaiah 49:8-16a Matthew 6:24-34

This last week I had the opportunity to literally follow Jesus’ advice to look at the birds. There was a lot of activity at the parsonage on Monday. With the approval of the Trustees and the financial support of the Thrift Shop the trees in the front yard and the back yard got a much needed trimming. There are no longer branches over the roof, and there is some much needed sunshine in the heavily shaded yard, but there was also a very nice side benefit.

Even though we have placed two bird feeders in the back yard and kept them stocked with sunflower seed they have attracted very few birds. I had the suspicion that it may have been because the excess of foliage didn’t allow very good flight patterns for birds to come and go. Early Monday evening, with the freshly groomed trees, I was sitting in my easy chair looking out at the back yard and, what do you know, a very nice blue jay flew right down to the bird feeder, helped himself to a very nice supper and then refreshed himself in the bird bath on the patio. Taking the time to follow Jesus advice and “look at the birds of the air” is very wise spiritual counsel.

Early Wednesday morning I was on a bike ride out to Emerson Point. I may have been the first person there besides the ranger that morning. About a half mile before the tip of the point there was a bird in the middle of the road. As I approached he flew off to my right and as I passed I glanced over and saw two of them. They were in the branches of the mangroves so I turned around to look at them further. I didn’t immediately recognize them. It just so happened that the Park Ranger was driving past and I gestured for him to stop which he did. I showed the birds to him and asked him if he could identify them for me. He was nice enough but didn’t seem to have a clue so when I got home I looked them up. It turns out that they were juvenile Yellow-crowned Night Herons. You have to get up early in the morning to see them.

As you can tell, a good part of my sermon preparation this week has been to keep my eyes out for birds. Other trips to Emerson point have yielded a number of sightings of the always beautiful Osprey. There are actually some nesting in one of the perches right beside the road about half way in. If you are going through a time of worries, a trip out to Emerson Point might not be a bad prescription.

Then Thursday I was driving over to Largo to a meeting at the District office. I pulled up to a stop light getting ready to make a left hand turn. As I sat at the light I looked over at the median. As I waited at the light a dove flew down. There was a clump of dried grass in the gutter at the side of the road, and the dove picked through it looking for something to eat. I’m not really a bird psychologist but the dove actually looked quite content to be looking for food in this way.

It seems to me that what Jesus is saying is just that simple. But I would never underestimate our ability to complicate things. We complicate things to the degree that we are involved and affected. In other words, if it is a problem you are having it is quite easy for me to say, "Don't worry, be happy!" But at the same time, if it is me that is in a tangle tied up in knots and you blithely come along and say, "Don't worry! Be happy!" I might be inclined to want to punch you in the nose.

I think it is worth taking another look at just what Jesus is saying when he says "do not worry" and at least as important as well, what Jesus is not saying.

First of all, Jesus is not just patting us on the back and saying, "Don't worry. Everything will come out all right." There are real tragedies in this life and a life of faith does not have to pretend otherwise. The last few weeks we have watched of the recovery from the typhoon in Myanmar and the earthquake in China. How inappropriate would it be to walk up to a person who had just lost their family and their home and just say to them, "Don't worry, everything is going to be ok." It's not OK.

Jesus is also not saying in these verses that somehow God is going to step in and correct all our follies and provide relief for all of our omissions. When he says "don't worry about tomorrow" Jesus is not advocating some kind of reckless attitude to life that ignores our need for prudent preparation. In Luke 14 Jesus talks about the wisdom of "counting the cost" and being prudent in the way we live our lives.¹ Living by faith in Christ is not the same thing as living foolishly or recklessly.

Jesus is also not saying that those who trust God will never be insulted or persecuted or maligned or made fun of. That is an especially difficult thing for any of us to endure. Jesus had already told his disciples to expect, and actually to rejoice when they were persecuted for his sake. I was talking with a colleague this week. He was telling me about being at a Church Conference where there was an especially passionate debate about an issue that he deeply cared about. Afterwards another clergy said something to him that was very demeaning and hurtful. Growing past an experience like that asks a real spiritual maturity of us but I don't think it is helpful, nor is it Jesus intention to be dismissive and say, "Don't worry about it."

Jesus is not saying that we should ignore food. He has instructed us to pray each day for our daily bread. On his last night with his disciples Jesus demonstrated the importance of all his disciples sharing in the fellowship of a meal. How we eat together is very important. And nothing Jesus said should be construed to be critical or dismissive of the value of honest, diligent work.

¹ Luke 14:28-30

Jesus is not saying that the lilies and flowers will live happily ever after. There is no fairy tale ending in the gospels. There is always a humble acknowledgement throughout scripture of the frailty and the finiteness of life. All life is precious and all life is fragile. I love the scripture from Isaiah, "The grass withers, the flower fades but the word of our God will stand forever." As a Pastor I am humbled every year at the beginning at Lent at the Ash Wednesday service where we observe the imposition of ashes. As I take my finger smudged with ashes and make the sign of the cross on each person's forehead we say, "Remember, from dust you were made and to dust you will return." We are tempted to live as if life is cheap and we are bullet proof, but the joy of a life of faith is far more resilient than life lived recklessly.

So what IS Jesus saying here? One thing he is saying is to be very careful about the temptation to measure our lives by how much we appear to be in control of our lives. Be careful because that is all an illusion.

I heard of one spiritual teacher who gave each of her students a big stick of purple chalk and took them outside to the sidewalk and instructed them to stand there and draw a circle around themselves. She then told them, "In all the world the person inside that circle is the only one that you can control." None of us is in control of our destinies. We like to think we are, but none of us is in control of our birth or our death. We are ultimately powerless in the face of our destiny, but there is one who has all power. We call that one God. Jesus called that one Abba, and his invitation to each of us is to do the same.

Jesus is clear in cautioning us about the purpose of our lives. He says that if our purpose is to just keep our heart beating, our stomach full, and our wardrobe expanding, we will each one eventually and inevitably fail. Our Thrift Shop is a vibrant testimony to that reality. Where do you think most of those clothes come from? Where do I think my clothes are going to end up?

Jesus caution about worrying is very specific here. Don't worry just about what YOU will eat. Don't worry just about what YOU will drink! Don't worry just about what YOU will wear! If you make your decisions based just on the best interest of the person in the purple circle, even if you expand your circle to include you and your family, there will not be enough room for you and God.

Jesus begins this teaching by saying "No one can serve two masters. No one can serve both God and wealth" and all his cautions about worry are to illustrate that teaching. Many of us read this passage and just automatically exclude ourselves. Jesus can't be talking about me because I'm not wealthy, but that is not what Jesus is referring to here. He doesn't care about how many zeroes are in your net worth even though most of us have more than we care to divulge.

What Jesus is saying talking about here is the way we set our priorities. How do we decide what comes first in our lives? In our little purple circle of influence how do we set our priorities?

Jesus teaches us that the most precious gift we have been given is being created in the image of God and that can be most simply understood as our belovedness. The gift of that identity is already with us from our first breath. The next gift we receive is our breath. Every breath we take is literally a gift from God. If you have any doubt about that just ask anyone who has ever breathed on a ventilator about the importance of breath.

Think about it. Breath is one of those gifts that functions both consciously and unconsciously. We can choose to breathe in deeply and breathe out, breathe in and breathe out. Being conscious of our breathing can be a very helpful physical and spiritual exercise, but at the same time, breathing is such a gift that you are going to keep on breathing even if you don't think about it. Your body will not let you forget to breathe. You can't get so busy with life that you say, "Oh my, I got so busy today that I forgot all about breathing."

So even though we like to think we are at least in control of all in our purple circle its nice to have some help when we need it. That is quite a gift. The third gift we have each been given is the power to choose. We grow into this gift. It is a normal part of the maturing process. We are all Gentiles here. We learn to feed ourselves, and we learn to clothe ourselves, and that is all good. It is more than good, it is important to know how to do these things, but Jesus is giving us a different kind of invitation here.

It is an invitation. It is a challenge. It is like opening a love letter that says, "I want to be first in your heart." Jesus came to personally deliver that love letter from God to each one of you. Each one of us has been given just enough power to say either Yes or No. It is perfectly acceptable to be as clear as possible about the choice here. God's desire is to give us all we need. We do not worship a great manipulator who is going to offer us some great deal once we sign on the dotted line. The rain falls on the just and the unjust. Saying Yes to God is no guarantee that we are going to get more than our share of the best toys. Saying Yes to God is not a guarantee of immunity from hunger or pain or death. We will still live in our bodies and our bodies are a precious gift to us.

But Jesus says have the faith that God wants to be in relationship to you as Abba Father. With that relationship comes a different kind of power than the world offers. It is the power to have faith in God's steadfast love. It is the power to hope that by having the courage to be fully present in today that we can have confidence in our future with God. It is the power to love, to love not just those who are closest to us although that is a great place to begin but to expand our love so that we can love those we call our enemies as well.

I will close with this thought. Much, most, of our striving is somehow connected to our wanting to have more than someone else, more control, more recognition, more success, more happiness. But when Jesus says “Strive first for the kingdom of God” it is a very different kind of striving. It is a desire to serve. It is a desire to express our gratitude. In 1 Corinthians² Paul asks this question, “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Rev Stephen Hoffman
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First United Methodist Church of Palmetto

² 1 Corinthians 4:7