

“Really.....Don’t Worry?”

Rev. Robert H. Wade

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Matthew 6:25-34

Philippians 3:5-9

Matthew 6:24-34

²⁴“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

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.

Really.....Really.....Don’t Worry? That seems to be what Jesus is saying. Seems like there is little wiggle room for worrying in Jesus’ teaching. **“I tell you, do not worry about your life!” Really....Don’t Worry?**

I don’t know about you but it seems we have plenty to worry about. We live in very anxious times! Those of us living today may be the least receptive generation to Jesus’ message, “don’t worry.” With a 24/7 news cycle, online coverage of the whole world and iPhones we have more information than anyone ever had before and therefore more cause to worry. There’s a lot to worry about and we can access the bad news any time we want.

While we are concerned about global, issues it's the personal, close to home stuff that we worry about most. *What are some common worries?*

--health....finances....family.....job security....the church

Don't worry.....Really?

I remember preaching on this same passage, in a former church, in which I confessed that I worry. A man came up to me after worship and said he had learned that worry doesn't help. He had trained himself to ask the question, "*Can I do anything about this, now?*" When the answer was "No," he told himself to just forget about it and he was able to sleep like a baby. Worry? "*Just forget about it!*" I thanked him for his advice and immediately became envious of his non-anxious approach to life. Then I worried about being envious!

I think there are *some* who genuinely don't worry but I'm not one of them and I have a hunch that there are more than a few worriers here this morning. For those of you who don't worry you can go ahead and wonder about who will be winning Oscars tonight. But for those of us who do worry, know that Jesus understands and he says "don't worry!"

Some of you may believe that, because I am a pastor and speak of holy things and supposedly have a direct line to God, I don't worry. I hate to burst your bubble but I do worry. A good friend of mine once said of her father, "*he was the designated fretter in their family.*" I don't know if every family has a designated fretter or not but, if that's the case, I am surely the one in my family. I am intimately acquainted with worry!

I can worry about anything. I even worry that I am worrying. After all Jesus said, "***Don't worry!***" Because my life is centered in the church I especially worry about our church, Fairmont Presbyterian. Let me give just a couple of examples. Following worship last week, a member came up to me and asked if I thought our church was dying. I told this friend that, yes, I thought our church was dying but I believed in resurrection and new life.

In hind sight I wish I would have said, “*Yes, I believe our church is dying numerically but the heart and spirit of our church is very much alive. And where there is heart and spirit and a genuine belief that God is not finished with us yet, there is hope for new life. We are an Easter people, after all!*” But I admit I worry about the numerical decline of Fairmont. When I was called as your pastor 13 plus years ago we had over 1,200 members and now we have 531 members. Someone once said there are two kinds of people in the world: the *outward blame bias* people who invariable point the finger of blame at others. Then there are the *inward blame bias* who always seem to find a way to point the finger of blame at themselves. All my life I have been an inward blame biased person and there is not a day that goes by that I don’t take responsibility in some way, shape or form for the decline of our church. It is an understatement to say that I worry a lot about Fairmont.

But I don’t just worry about Fairmont’s numerical decline, what really grabs me is worrying about individual members. I too often wake up at 3, 4 or 5am, with an individual front and center in my mind. It can be genuine concern for a person’s health or relationship to the church but it’s often an immediate panic that I coulda, shoulda done something more for an individual or a situation. Like I said, “*I can worry about anything or anyone.*” That’s my story. I have a hunch that each one of you have your own “*worry stories*” from your own world of reality.....home, work, school, ethics, finances, family, etc. I share my story to assure you I am not immune to worry. And that brings us back to Jesus’ admonition “*don’t worry.*”

What concerns me most about Jesus’ teaching to not worry is that he ties it directly to faith. He says do not worry about your life, or what you will eat or what you will drink or what you will wear. Remember how God takes care of the birds. Then he asks a rhetorical question, “***Are you not of more value than they?***” This is *the* perspective Jesus yearns for us to embrace! *Remember who you are and to whom you belong.* He makes the point that worry doesn’t add a thing to your life! Then he turns to the beauty of the lilies of the field and says, ³⁰ ***But 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?*** That’s the kicker that worries me. Four little words..... *you of little faith!* I believe the point can be made that worry is akin to lack of faith and being an inward blame biased person I worry that I am a failure at faith. Maybe you have also doubted your faith?

With what I have shared this morning you can see why I appreciate the concept of the *journey of faith*. I do not believe that any human being is totally consistent in her or his faith. We run into road blocks, take detours, encounter speed bumps and when we get to moving too fast we get pulled over for speeding. The only One I have found to be consistent in my journey of faith is Jesus who faithfully rides with me through all of the twists and turns of my life. Jesus is always there to guide, challenge, comfort, teach and give purpose. But he waits for us to turn to him.

Have you ever experienced those dreaded early morning suddenly awake and possessed moments? Those times when you wake up with a responsibility, a thought, a question, a loose end on your mind that deprives you of sleep and will not let you go. I have learned that I can submit to the interruption and get caught up in the merry go round of discontent....this is worst case scenario. I have, on occasion, submitted the interruption to God in prayer and been able to get back to sleep. I have, on occasion, simply gotten up and begun working in my home office....this is not a bad option for I have learned that working the issue can bring a sense hope. Or, like this last Wednesday morning, I got up and went to the living room and began rereading our Lenten Study book Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home. This is a life-giving book!

Richard Foster, in a down to earth way, helps us see that prayer is the life-blood of a vibrant relationship with God. So, around 5:00 am this past Wednesday morning, I picked up this book that I've read before and even taught here at Fairmont. Once again God used Foster's book to sooth my soul and help me unload the pent-up worries that had catapulted my mind into overdrive. In the very first chapter on *Simple Prayer* Foster writes that we can so over think the theology, mechanics, purpose and practicality of prayer that we never pray. This is what I read and prayed just this past Wednesday morning....

“The truth of the matter is, we all come to prayer with a tangled mass of motives—altruistic and selfish, merciful and hateful, loving and bitter. Frankly, this side of eternity we will never unravel the good from the bad, the pure from the impure. But what I have come to see is that God is big enough to receive us with all our mixture. We do not have to be bright, or pure, or filled with faith, or anything. That is what grace means, and not only are we saved by grace, we live by it as well. And we pray by it.....What I am trying to say is that God receives us just as we are and accepts our prayers just as they are. In the same way that a small child cannot draw a bad picture so a child of God cannot offer a bad prayer. So we are brought to the most basic, the most primary form of prayer: Simple Prayer. Let me describe it for you. In Simple Prayer we bring ourselves before God just as we are, warts and all.” (page 8)

I needed that! I needed to hear, for the millionth time, that God invites me to bring my worries to Jesus. I needed to be reminded of that wonderful verse I memorized long ago, *“Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.”* (I Peter 5:7) It is through prayer that we come to God and experience living faith. It is through prayer that we find our heart’s true home. It is through prayer that our worries turn into God’s opportunities. It is through prayer we gain a new perspective that focuses on what God is doing and, it is through prayer our fixation on what I or anyone else is or is not doing is lifted. Through prayer I see that my calling, as your pastor, is to guide you to find, the daily, weekly, yearly rhythms that will help you discover your true home in Jesus Christ.

On this side of the grave most of us will battle with worry. However, as we learn the joy of being *in Christ* through prayer we experience, at least for a time, freedom from worry. I am most hopeful that our Lenten Study Groups will be a source of spiritual renewal for you. And even if you don’t join a Lenten group, at least, buy the book. You will be glad you did! Prayer helps us find our way home.

Really.....don’t worry? As a worrier, I’ll admit that’s a hard one. Through prayer, however, I have experienced Christ’s “peace that passes all understanding” enough to know that Jesus can guard my heart and mind from the demons of worry. As Paul wrote to the church of Philippi....

⁴**Rejoice** in the Lord always; again I will say, **Rejoice**. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶**Do not worry** about anything, but in everything by **prayer and supplication** with **thanksgiving** let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the **peace of God**, which surpasses all understanding, **will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus**.

I conclude with an invitation to not only pray for yourself and your loved ones, but also for our church. As most of you know, our church is facing some significant issues across every ministry area. As we enter the Season of Lent, I invite you to participate in a Season of Prayer for Fairmont. You will find a daily prayer guide in your bulletin. Please take this home and pray for Fairmont...our ministries, our mission, our people and our future. Prayer is one of the most helpful ministries in which you can give yourself.

Many years ago Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a prayer that has helped millions from catastrophing into the future and to live in the present. You will find his Serenity Prayer on the cover of your bulletin. Let us pray this prayer together:

Serenity Prayer

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
And wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful world
as it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His Will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with Him
Forever in the next.
Amen.

The following Prayers of the People was offered by *Susan Braiser*:

ALMIGHTY GOD, Our Creator, our Redeemer, our Sustainer, Our Friend,

We come before you as people full of concerns and anxieties.

We come before you afraid to truly to trust your promise that “through prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, your peace that surpasses all understanding will guard our hearts and minds.”

We offer up to you these petitions and prayers for your guidance and forgiveness that we might set down our worries and allow our lives, our hearts, our minds to be steeped in your refreshing, calming, wonderful peace.

Lord, we pray for children and infants new to the world and ask your blessings upon their parents and grandparents and pray that each of us will be mindful of how our actions can prove to be a instrument of your goodness as they grow.

Lord, we pray for infant governments struggling to be born. We pray for your peace to quell the violence and that reason and civility will prevail as peoples, so long silenced, find their voice. As we watch these histories unfold, we beg you to use the lessons Jesus Christ taught us and echoed in the actions of leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Gandhi to find a new way to bring these reforms. We pray that you guide each of us to be mindful of how our actions can prove to be an instrument of your goodness as they grow.

Lord, we pray for a planet and the environmental crisis that looms on the horizon. Give us the courage to make the sacrifices and changes that lead to sustainability.

Lord, only you know the health concerns of each member of this congregation and our loved ones and friends. So many have injuries and illnesses of the body, spirit and soul that refuse to heal. We pray that your healing touch will flow over each soul like gentle rain in the spring and bring the much-needed relief.

Lord, we pray for all those who find themselves grieving for the loss of a loved one.

Lord, we pray for our leaders. For our world leaders, our President, our Representatives, our teachers, our pastors and ask your blessing on them all. We pray that you ease their burdens and give them guidance that their work will be honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise so that it might be a reflection of your will for our world.

And praying for that which is honorable and excellent, we thank you for the gifts and talents of Norma. We pray that you walk with her and bring her a life that is pleasing and worthy of praise. We pray for Fairmont as we find our new way without Norma's love and direction.

Lord, as our nation, community and families struggle in the faltering economy, we ask for your peace to guard our minds and hearts from financial worries. And in this time, we ask for your blessing upon the entrepreneurs – that they be honorable and industrious and refresh our economy so that it will be balanced and sustainable.

Lord, I ask this final pray for teenagers -- that they too will learn from their leaders, their teachers, their parents the value of being honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise (and God if it be your will, could you afford each family in this congregation you have so richly blessed with teenagers, just week free from teenage angst.)

Help us to remember to rejoice in your blessings always!

Amen