

Sermon 031316 Worry  
Scripture- Matthew 6: 25-34  
Sermon Title- Blessed By God

Sometimes Jesus is hard to understand. For example, some but not all the Parables are just puzzling. But sometimes, Jesus just hits us like we've got a bull's eye painted on our hearts. Sometimes Jesus cannot be any clearer, any more accurate, and any more right. Today's lesson from the Sermon on the Mount is an example of Jesus hitting the bull's eye. Let me repeat a few of the lines we just heard from Jesus: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. But seek first His kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." These, my friends, are words that *we need to hear*.

I think if you took a survey of people in other religious traditions on how they view Christians, if they observed how we act and talk, they might say that we are religious people driven by our anxieties. The fuel of our faith is what we are worried about. A big way in which we are one with each other is in our furrowed brows. Listen to our prayers: God give me this. God spare me that. God help me through this. Why me, God? God please pass this illness by. When we gather to worship and celebrate, what is it that we share more than anything else? Our concerns.

Some of us rise worrying to an art form. You know of whom I'm a speaking... mothers. It has been said that God doesn't have time to worry about everything, which is why God created mothers. As children grow and experience the great adventure that is this life, somewhere, hands are being rung.

Even when Jesus tells us that we need not worry about what we shall eat, what we shall drink, and what we shall wear, those worries are certainly still with us. But we can add a whole raft of contemporary anxieties: what will people think of us, what will we think of ourselves, what will the future hold, what will someone say about us, what will someone do to us, will I matter, will I be here, will anyone care? What will happen to my health, my finances, my family, my friends, my wellbeing? What shall I do with what I have? What can I do about the things I haven't got? Jesus makes it clear. Don't worry about those things. Seek first His kingdom of righteousness, and all these things- food, drink, job; reputation- shall be yours as well.

It gets hard to do when we start listing our worries. We've talked about personal worries, but we've got a whole umbrella of worries beyond our personal worries. We worry about terrorism, the economy, and the environment. We worry about who might be elected president. We worry about natural disasters. We worry about the direction of the country. We worry about who might be elected president. Some of us worry about global warming. Some of us worry about those who believe

in global warming winning the day and thereby bring in government overregulation that ruins the economy. We worry about who might be elected president. We worry about the schools, health care, domestic violence, and so on and so on. We worry about who might be elected president.

We need to remember that there is an irrationality to worry. Much of what we worry about never happens. Mark Twain said, “I am an old man and I have known many troubles, but most of them never happened.”

I don't want to deny that anxiety has its up sides. Anxiety can be a real contributor to achievement. The students who do well in school will tell you that the all night studying was driven as much by fear of failure as dedication to good grades. Each new invention has been worried over. Goodness can come from anxiety if we set ourselves to work to overcome it. Someone said, “Once you learn to fear hell, you've made the first step toward heaven.”

Now, as the gospel today points out, the Lord is not indifferent to our anxieties and our worries. He does not dismiss them as foolishness. Your concerns are the Lord's concerns. God is there with you in your suffering. The Lord is hoping that you will do something about it. God knows your anxieties about your health, the state of the world, and the state of your soul. God knows these things.

Jesus is neither unaware nor indifferent to your worries and anxieties. In the Sermon on the Mount, his most expanded, systematic, and reflective utterance, he tells us that we ought not to burden ourselves with all these worries. We ought not be defined by our worries.

Jesus tells us that we ought to focus on God and God's righteousness. He is telling us that if we give God our priority, we will gain perspective on everything else, and everything else will fall into place. Now, will the world turn into Valhalla, will we land in Utopia? Of course not, but our perspective, our view of the world will become healthy.

This is the most important thing that will fall into place for us if we make God the priority, and it is the key to the whole issue. If we focus on God, we will become aware of what we have already been given. If we focus on God we will see how blessed we are already. We will see that we are blessed in every moment, including this moment. We will see how endowed, how rich God has made us. Psalm 103 says it beautifully, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless His holy name."

To give God priority requires a reordering of the way we think. It requires an attitude adjustment on the part of anxiety driven believers like ourselves. A way to make that adjustment, the way to refocus our spiritual energy, is to consider not what we need as the beginning point of our spiritual lives, but what we have already received. This sounds

simple but I know you and I know me. My experience is that we begin with what we lack, what we want, what we desire, rather than what we have, what we have received. When we focus on the worries, we do not think of how we ought to respond to God's blessings.

I am not saying that we stop asking for God's help, God's peace, and God's strength. I am suggesting that we start with praise and thanksgiving to God for what God has already done for us and for others. We are talking about moving the dial... more 'thank you God' to offset the 'please God.' If we start with the 'thank you's' the 'pleases' become less urgent.

In the prayer that we always say in worship, Jesus teaches us how to pray. He begins with praise of God, "Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." If we do not do this- if we do not put praise and thanksgiving first, our prayers become laundry lists, reflecting our anxieties and worries rather than thankfulness for our blessings. This is a way of enriching not only our personal prayer life, our relationship with God; but also Sunday morning worship as well.

My commitment since I've been here is to have praise and thanksgiving to God as front and center in the prayers that I write and deliver in worship. I know that much of prayer depends upon whom we are and where we are when we pray, including when we arrive here on Sunday morning. So often our hearts have been dragged through the mire and we arrive with heavy burdens. This must always be a place, if

not *the* place, to lay down those burdens. Our concerns must be held here and in our private prayer.

But let us begin with praise and thanks to God. Why? Because we *are*. We may not be what we used to be. We may not be what we will be, but we *are*. That is reason number one for praise and thanksgiving to God. We praise and thank God for our creation and our preservation. You are still here. With all your burdens and wounds, you made it this far and for that you can thank Almighty God. God blesses you.

What does that mean? What does it mean that God blesses you? A blessing is not a reward. Blessings are bestowed. To know that you are blessed means that you realize who God is and what God is doing, and who you are, to be so beloved by God. If we recognize our blessings, if we accept as truth that we are blessed, if we gain such a perspective, such a vision, we will see that we have no basic reason to be defined by our anxieties and worries. As Jesus teaches us this morning, “seek his kingdom and his righteousness.” If we do that, all of life- with its tragedy and challenges- finds its place.

When we think this way, we can focus on the presence and the power of God in our lives. Jesus is showing us the way to escape the quicksand of worry. When we know that God blesses us, life’s heartaches don’t ache as much. Blessings are not only what God does for us but also what God wishes for us. It is not an extraordinary thing to consider that God desires good things to happen to us. This is a sign

of spiritual growth and maturity. God blesses us and wants us to be happy. That knowledge sets us on the path to happiness.

I'd like to finish with a favorite prayer of mine from the Book of Common Prayer. That is the prayer book for Episcopalians and Anglicans. This prayer is called a Collect, written in Elizabethan prose. It sums up the message of praise and thanksgiving that I am trying to raise this day:

*O God, who hast prepared for those who love thee such good things as passes our understanding, pour into our hearts such love toward thee, that we, loving thee above all things, may obtain thy promises, which exceed all that we can desire.*

We are blessed people- blessed by God, and it brings happiness to remember that every day of our lives. AMEN