

“From Worry to Wonder”
 delivered Sunday, August 8, 2010
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 Luke 12:22-34

This is one of those passages of scripture that requires the preacher begin with a confession...that’s right - a first person, singular confession. I spent a good part of two days this week trying to avoid it, trying to come up with some introductory story, some funny little quip about someone else, but the text itself seemed to demand a bit more forthright honesty, so here it goes: I am a worrier. Now, in my own defense – which is how most confessions go, with some rational explanation attached, I’d like to say I come by my worrying naturally. It’s in my DNA, inherited – to a certain degree – from both sides of the family. From one side of my family, it’s a given that I would worry about certain matters of security, of financial wherewithal, with some material need to be prepared for the future, whatever the future might bring. From the other side of my family, I inherited a predisposition to worry about what is going on in the world – about pesticides and pollution, about matters of civil rights, war and peace, justice and fairness. So lo and behold, I’ve landed in a job with a forum to rant about matters of justice...and a job with a great pension plan! Covers both my genetic predispositions to worry!

But with this vocational calling of mine comes what?...more worry. I love you, and I worry about you...I have no illusion that I am alone in any of it, but I think it is fair to say that pastors in particular, and active church folks in general, help shoulder the burdens of grief, the weight of concern and secrets, a certain amount of anger and pain, and sadness. Thank God the church is also a place of great celebration for the most joyous occasions of life – births and weddings, baptisms and all kinds of triumphs. But those don’t exactly lesson our mental distress for all the concerns we carry in our hearts and minds.

So, when from the pages of scripture Jesus says to me – and to all of us this morning, “Do not worry about your life...” I find myself wanting to talk back and argue a little bit – albeit playfully! For goodness sake, Jesus, when did you get sandwiched in between the generations of aging parents and teenaged children? When did you lie awake at night wondering if you passed the exam, or if your job was on the line, or how what the doctor just told you would change the course of your life forever...? Most of us don’t worry too much about where our next meal is coming from or about having clothes to wear, but can’t we – with our God-given love for our neighbors – worry about the children at Hand Middle School who are homeless and have neither enough food nor proper clothing....Seems like a little more worry might even make us better disciples, but here you are telling us not to worry – any more than the flowers and the birds. Where is the grace and good news for us in what appears to me – at least – to be among your most impossible commands...telling us not to worry.

While I was having this little conversation back and forth with these words of Jesus, I looked up the meaning of this word, and I came to understand better Jesus’ concern. “Worry” comes from an old Germanic word which originally meant “strangle” or “choke.” It has physical, life threatening connotations in the sense of being seized by the throat. The original Greek word from our gospel also has the deadly notion of extreme anxiety. No wonder Jesus encourages us not to worry; he does not want our lives to be choked with anxiety. That’s why he appeals to the basics. Life is more than food or clothing, he says. These words were not intended for persons who do not have enough to eat. One cannot simply say to the starving, “Life is more than food.”

These words are addressed to people who have food to eat and clothes to wear, and yet who spend their lives trying to acquire more. (1)

In the first century, maybe Jesus knew more about what life would be like for us now than I might give him credit for. “We now know that anxiety itself can be a killer. Stress and worry can cause disease, or contribute to it – which, of course, produces the enchanting prospect of people worrying about worrying, a downward spiral” for sure. (2) As with so much of his teaching, Jesus goes to the heart of the way we are – in order to get his message across – about the coming of God’s kingdom. This wasn’t just good advice on how to live a happy, carefree life. It was a call for us to trust in God’s sovereignty, as one biblical scholar puts it, “sweeping the world with love and power, so that human beings, each made in God’s image and each one loved dearly, may relax in the knowledge that God is in control.

Reflecting on the birds and the flowers is not meant to encourage a kind of romantic nature-mysticism, but to stimulate serious understanding: God, the creator, loves to give good gifts, loves to give us the kingdom...this God is the One who calls us children – what is stopping us from trusting in that?” In using these images from nature to get his point across about the kingdom, Jesus gives us his most eloquent anecdote for worry – wonder. Consider the birds of the air and how God feeds them; of how much more value are you than the birds! Consider the lilies, how they grow...I care for you as much as I care for them. Do not keep striving so. Wonder is the anecdote to worry. Look around you, everywhere you look, Jesus says, you can see the creative power and providence of God.

The author and poet, D.H. Lawrence, who lived at the turn of the last century, wrote about wonder. He was concerned way back then about the toll that industrialization was taking on the human psyche, and that was long before all the distractions of email and Facebook and Twitter that have so many of us “on call” all the time – either for work or to keep up with other people. When we live with our faces glued to a screen – a television, a computer, a cell phone, who has time to consider the birds and wonder? A hundred years ago, D.H. Lawrence wrote: “When the wonder has gone out of a man he is dead. When all comes to all, the most precious element in life is wonder. Love is a great emotion and power is power. But both love and power are based on wonder. Plant consciousness, insect consciousness, fish consciousness, animal consciousness, all are related by one permanent element, which we may call the religious element in all life: the sense of wonder.” Lawrence concluded, “That is our sixth sense. And it is the natural religious sense.” (3) Wonder.

When I read that quote, I found myself traveling back in my mind to my childhood summers. Getting kicked out of the house and told not to come back until mealtime. Climbing a mulberry tree with a friend and picking berries until our hands were purple. Catching fireflies in mayonnaise jars with holes poked in the top until we had veritable natural lanterns. Lying in the grass in the dark and doing nothing but watching for shooting stars. Is there any way now – amid all the worries – to recover a daily sense of wonder? The message of the gospel this morning is that our life depends on it!

Author, Richard Lewis, writes of his childhood when he wondered how the grasshopper could jump so far, and why the salamander had black spots, saying: “In those days we knew as much as we had to know in order to ask what we didn’t know. Our ignorance was not just innocence, but the foundation from which we offered ourselves the daily surprise of discovering another question, another way to uncover something mysterious, something we hadn’t understood yesterday. We lived, so it seemed, by wonder; for by wondering we were able to multiply a growing consciousness of being alive.” (4)

A growing consciousness of being alive is what lies at the heart of Jesus' invitation "do not worry..." After wrestling all week with this passage of scripture, I have come to believe in something I think I already knew, but just need to remember. If we make more room in our lives for wonder, we will discover the burden of our worry will be eased, it will be much lighter. Simply because the birds of the air and the lilies of the field have been given a beautiful job to do – to remind us human creatures that God is God, and we rest in God's goodness. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreters Bible*, p. 259.
- 2) NT Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, p. 152-3.
- 3) D.H. Lawrence quoted in Martin Marty's *Context*, 11/1/02, p. 1.
- 4) Richard Lewis, "Living by Wonder," *Parabola*, Spring, 1997, p. 62.