



“Sermon on the Mount: On Worry” Matthew 6:25-34

Rev. Dr. Stacy C. Smith
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A few years ago, I was talking with my friend John who I hadn't seen in a while, and he was like, "Hey how are you doing?" And I said, "Fine, I'm good." And he said, "Really? Are you sure you're doing OK?" And I was like, "Um...I think so. Why?" And he said, "Well, another friend of ours – also named John, but that's a sidebar – he saw you at Otherlands Coffee Shop the other day and he said he was concerned about you because you just looked really anxious." And I thought for a minute and said, "Well yeah, I was at Otherlands the other day but I wasn't anxious or anything, I was just working." And John said, "Well, what were you working on?" And I was like, "I don't know, just some emails and stuff." And John, who knows me disturbing well, said, "Right, show me how you were working on your computer." And I was like, "I don't know, probably something like this... *TYPE FURIOUSLY WITH SCRUNCHED UP FACE.*" And John just laughed, and was said, "Yeah, I can't imagine why anyone would think you were anxious."

Truly I didn't really know this about myself, but I've got a lot of anxiety. I am a worrier. Sometimes I worry that I didn't know myself well enough to know that I was a worrier, which in and of itself is worrying. But I didn't really know I was a worrier. I always thought I was a happy go lucky, free spirit on the wings of chance. But no, no no, I belong to the Great Club of Worriers. Now of course, some of my anxiety is warranted. When my husband first got sick my therapist at the time wanted me to go on anti-anxiety medication and it just didn't feel right for me because, you know, anti-anxiety medication seems like something you should be on when you have anxiety for no reason, an anxiety disorder. But me, I have anxiety for a reason! At any minute, there was an above average chance that my husband might fall over and shake uncontrollably and possible die. Anxiety seems like an entirely appropriate response to that situation, and going on medication to suppress it seemed like a strange thing to do.

And now I'm worried that I made a joke about anti-anxiety medication and I just want to affirm that anyone who takes anti-anxiety or anti-depression medication, myself included, should not feel bad or worry that it's due to a lack of anything personally.

Take your meds if they help you, or as my friend Julie says, “Obey the 11th commandment: Thou shalt not go off thy anti-depressant.”

But really, it’s not just Kevin’s illness that gives me anxiety, lots of things do. And I do come by it honestly. My parents are both pro-worriers. My father is a big picture worrier, he worries about all the big things that could go wrong. He’s the type that if you’re 15 minutes behind curfew, it’s not because the movie ran long, it’s because you’re dead on the side of the highway, clearly that’s always what’s happening. You know, big picture worrying.

My mother though, is a little worrier. She is worried about whether the coral color on her headband perfectly matches the coral color on her shoes. You know, the small worries. And so, as their only child, I have the blessing of inheriting all their worries and so I get to worry about all the things, large and small.

And you know, maybe you’re not a big and a small worrier, maybe you’re one of those people who really is blessed without a care in the world, the free spirit who just like, lives and lets live, trusts that things will just work themselves out, like, a “don’t worry, be happy” kind of person. I don’t know, it’s hard for me to even describe such a person, I don’t really know what it’s like. But I believe there are people out there *who don’t type every email like this...* who live life with less anxiety, less worry, than those of us who call Anxiety our home away from home.

And yet, even for those people, I feel like the world does not always correspond to their attitude. It is so hard to engage with any social issue, any contemporary problem, any “news of the day” at all without just a cascade of worry following closely behind. I mean, I don’t need to list these for you do I? You know what I’m talking about – presidents and press conferences and COVID and cancers, Medicaid funding and communities flooding, sexual harassment and city-wide homelessness, shootings, atrocities, horrors, questions, fears, stress. To quote a million headlines, “If you’re not worried, you’re not paying attention.”

Paying attention to the world as it operates these days is literally a case study in anxiety. “According to Gallup, in 2022, more Americans were stressed, worried and angry than at any point in the last 12 years, including during the worst days of the COVID pandemic. Furthermore, American stress levels are among the highest in the world. Seriously, Americans were as stressed as Iranians and more stressed than citizens of Rwanda, Turkey, and Venezuela. That’s nuts.”¹

And so into this mix, into this anxiety and stress and worry, come these famous words from Jesus: “Do not worry about your life. Look at the birds of the air, consider the lilies

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/07/24/donald-trump-is-stressing-out-america/>

of the field, if God cares for them, how much more will he care for you?" And you sort of think... AH that sounds *so nice*, doesn't it? Yes, don't worry, God has this, I would *love* to feel that way all the time, to remember that I just shouldn't worry, but...how? How, when we are literally covered with issues and anxiety all the time?" What is Jesus saying here, that having worries means we have too little faith? That gives me anxiety too! How can we live in this world where we have to balance an almost constant barrage of anxiety with this "Don't worry, be happy" Jesus? **What does Jesus mean when he tells us not to worry?**

First, let's look at what he *doesn't* mean. I don't think Jesus means that the world is not a difficult place, full of legitimate worries. Jesus is, I would say, keenly aware that there is great injustice in our society. One pastor says that if we interpret his words that way, "Jesus seems out of step with our society and [fundamentally misunderstands] the lives we are living."² So I don't think Jesus is saying that if we were better people, better Christians, we would not worry.

Second thing he doesn't mean: when Jesus says, "Look at the birds of the air, they neither sow nor reap, and yet they are cared for," he doesn't mean that the birds or the flowers *don't do anything* at all. Birds, as far as I can tell, they're busy all day long, from sunup to sundown, taking care of business. And flowers too, are busy, creating chlorophyll or making pollen or whatever it is that they do, someone who's a master gardener can tell us, but I'm pretty sure that flowers work, they do things all day long. So by referencing how God cares for the birds and the flowers, I don't think that Jesus is saying that these other things are stagnant creations that just reap the benefits of God's grace through no movement or action of their own. They may not reap or sow, they might not plan the ways that we do, but they are still moving, still working, still actively doing their part in God's world.

And finally, I don't think that Jesus is saying that if we just had more trust in God, we wouldn't need to worry. I mean, well, he sort of is saying exactly that, and that is one way to interpret this passage, and I think a lot of people do, and it's a fine lesson to take from this scripture, actually. I think you can read this passage and say, if we can just live like the birds and the flowers, and do what we are about, and stop trying to be all things for all people, and worrying so much about if we're enough or if we're doing enough, then we will be closer to God and closer to Jesus. You can read that in this passage, and take that lesson from it, and it's a fine lesson to learn, and if it helps you today then I think that's great. But honestly, I don't think that what Jesus is saying, or maybe more accurately, I don't think that is all that Jesus is saying.

² <https://aweirdthing.wordpress.com/2011/02/20/dont-fuss-about-whats-on-the-table/>

Because, we have to remember, this passage is a portion of a much longer Sermon on the Mount. We've been discussing this for the last two weeks, and unfortunately due to time constraints I am sort of skipping over a lot of the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, and taking us all to the end. But honestly, I'm sort of saving you all a lot of time. I mean, it's long, the Sermon on the Mount. It covers *a lot* of other stuff. One pastor sums up the list of what Jesus is preaching about like this:

- First, you've got the Beatitudes
- Then you've got, Being salt of the earth and light of the world
- Then, Obeying and fulfilling the law
- Anger and reconciliation
- Committing adultery
- Divorce
- Letting your Yes be Yes or your No be No
- Do not retaliate, instead publically expose unjust authority
- Love your enemies
- Give alms, but don't make a show of it
- Pray, but don't make a show of it
- Fast, but don't make a show of it
- Store up treasures in heaven not on earth
- Make sure your inner light is healthy
- And finally...don't think you can serve two masters: God and wealth³

So just to recap, Jesus preaches a two chapter sermon that includes the topics of blessing the sick, obeying society's laws, being angry, committing adultery, getting divorced, experiencing violence, dealing with enemies, and handling money. Like, that's basically everything there is to worry about!?! I think we literally have made a list of everything possible that could ever cause any kind of human stress. Maybe dealing with teenagers, but they probably are included in the "Love your enemies" category. Seriously! Jesus brings up almost everything you could ever be stressed about in one single sermon and then he says – and this is the kicker – THEREFORE. "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." Jesus lays out everything we can worry about and has the *chutzpah* to say, "Therefore, I tell you, don't worry about anything."

And strangely enough, I think that "therefore" is probably the most important word in this passage. What Jesus is saying with that Therefore, in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, is this: He's saying: "Here are all these lessons. I am giving them to you. I am telling you what to do. Bless the poor, be the salt that complements other people,

³ <https://www.holytextures.com/2009/10/matthew-6-25-33-year-b-thanksgiving-sermon.html>

forgive people even when it's tough, pray for people who torment you, stand up against violence, pray in an authentic way, and if you don't know how, here are some words to help you, and finally, don't put your faith in money because it will always let you down, but put your faith in God." All of those lessons are in the Sermon on the Mount. And then he says, "And now, I have told you what to do and how to be in the world, *therefore* do not worry. Do not have anxiety. The concerns of today are enough for today. Just do what I've told you to do for today, and leave everything else for another time."

Jesus is saying, "You know, you don't have to figure everything out, because things will not always make sense. You don't have to worry about all these things that are out of your control, but you do have to do what I command you to do.

Some people will get incurable diseases, some people will have disabilities. Sometimes the reason is clear, and sometimes it's not. It's not fair, it doesn't make sense. But when it happens, Jesus says, bless the sick.

Sometimes people will be terrible to other people. They will abuse them, they hurt the innocent, they lie and cheat and treat you horribly. You will probably not be able to figure them out, why they do what they do. It is frustrating, hurtful, stressful. But when it happens, Jesus says, pray for them.

Sometimes there will be random acts of violence. People have anger and fear and illness and ready access to guns and other kinds of weaponry and they will use them to terrible effects. It is deeply frightening and disheartening, but when it happens, Jesus says, do not meet violence with more violence.

There will be times when money is a major source of stress, because money is, it just always is. But when it happens, Jesus says, remember that money and treasure are two different things. Fill your heart with treasures, and the money thing will work itself out.

And there will be times when you feel very far away from God, when you don't know how to pray, when you aren't sure that God exists. It will be so scary, so sad, so frustrating when you feel so far from God. But when it happens, Jesus says, I got you, use these words: "Our Father, who art in heaven."

And therefore, therefore, because I have told you what to do when you are stressed,
because I have shown you how to live when you are anxious,
because I have given you words for when you worry,
because I have chosen to come among you as a person, fully human, fully divine,

because I am a God who does not separate myself from the anxieties of life and love and money and stress,

because I have come among you, and lived for you, and will die for you,

therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, do not worry about tomorrow. Do the things that I have commanded you, and the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, will guard your minds and assail your worries and surpass your anxieties and keep you close to God's love.

It's true, if you're not worried, you're probably not paying attention. But once you pay attention, Jesus says, here's what to do: Don't worry, be happy, in the certainty of God's love and care and grace for God's children. Therefore, may it be so. Amen.