

What? Me Worry?
Matthew 6:24-34
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This week, I really tried to practice what Jesus is preaching in tonight's passage. I studied it and reflected on it and then I tried really hard to be less worrisome and anxious. I decided not to shave or shower as often, or to care what my clothes looked like, whether they were wrinkled or stained, or whether the avocado was mostly rotten, or if the leftovers had spoiled. I just really kicked back and let the chips fall where they may. The part I really homed in on was the very end, the part about today and tomorrow: "Don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." And so I tried really hard not worry about the next day, and to focus in on not worrying about either today or tomorrow. It was a lot of work, not worrying. But I persevered. And I did that every day this week, so well in fact, that here we are on Sunday, today, with worries all its own, so many worries, that well, I never did get around to writing a sermon, cause I always had tomorrow to work on it. But since I wasn't supposed to worry about tomorrow, I figured, "Hey, why worry? Jesus knows what he is talking about." So let's just watch a movie tonight, whaddya say? Craig, could you please start the Star Wars DVD?

Well, I suspect that if all that were really true, I really would have had some trouble to deal with today. Some of that trouble may have come from you, and

especially from your very responsible church council, being a little put out by my lack of effort, but more likely, I would have found trouble from God, because in my determined efforts to not worry, I would have overlooked the very key to not worrying, that very important phrase in tonight's passage, "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Indeed, I think that overlooking that one line of wisdom is often how we read this passage, and so we do sort of scoff at Jesus telling us not to worry, because the unfortunate truth is that there is a great deal to worry about in our lives, and in our community, and in our society. For us it may not be clothes and food, but it is crime, it is drugs, it is violence, it is foreclosures, or bankruptcy, or terrorist attacks or an increasingly polluted environment, or the threat of pandemic viruses, or the impending rapture—you name it, we probably do, or probably should, worry about it. I worry, perhaps not to a state of paralysis, but I worry enough to make sure my gate is locked at night, and that my child avoids drug dealers, and that I have a water filter, and all the rest of the precautions I need to take to prevent some sort of unpleasant eventuality. Indeed, I have often wondered what we would do in Costa Rica with the enormous amount of time and money we currently spend on our personal security, if it were suddenly not necessary. Think about what you could be doing with the time you presently spend simply using your keys each day! Yes, there is a lot to worry about. And who is this Jesus telling us not to worry?

Well, it's the Jesus who introduced this part of the Sermon on the Mount with some sage advice that easily gets lost in the words on anxiety which follow, much as we lose sight of what we are to strive for first, the kingdom of God and its righteousness, when we are all caught up in our various worries. Jesus begins this whole part by saying, "No one can love two masters; for a slave will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth," or as the older translations say, "You cannot serve both God and Mammon," Mammon being an Aramaic-language word loosely translated as tangible things, or better yet, "stuff." You can't serve God and stuff and come away non-anxious. You can't love both God and stuff and pass your days worry-free, although many, many people have tried to prove Jesus wrong, including, I'd wager, many of us here in this room. As more than one person has noted, Jesus is not saying that stuff, wealth, money, is bad, per se, but rather that you can't have an ultimate loyalty to it, and to God; there aren't enough hours in the day to satisfy the demands inherent in pursuing two ultimate loyalties.

Jesus was not a rich man, but he knew a lot about money and possessions, enough to spend more time talking about them than almost any other topic in the gospels besides the kingdom of heaven. Jesus knew of the insistence of mammon, of its constant, relentless, never-ending pursuit of human affection, and attention, and loyalty. The insistence of mammon is like a drum beat that goes on into

infinity, footsteps behind you from which you can never seem to escape, no matter how fast you try to walk or run. The insistence of mammon is television commercials and popup website ads, and billboards, and symbols of the good life, ever-present, always before your eyes, and increasingly tailored to what mammon already knows about your tastes and likes. You know that there is a reason you see certain ads on your web browser, don't you? You see, mammon insists on forcefeeding you cookies, not the chocolate chip kind, but the electronic kind that track every click of your mouse or touchpad and report back to their masters about where you have visited, and by some arcane mathematical formula, what you were really looking for when you went there. Mammon is stalking you, 24/7, moment by moment, hour by hour, day by dragging day, in a thousand small uncaring ways. It wants you for its own, for you to possess it, whether through purchase, theft, or gift. And once you have it, no matter how you acquired it, it insists on being cleaned or fixed or displayed or turned off or on, or protected or showed off, or moved or stored; mammon never stops insisting that you pay attention to it. And you do. You can't help yourself. Even in your dreams, it goes on insisting, insisting, and insisting. It's the Terminator, but without the Hollywood ending where human ingenuity finds a way to finally terminate the terminator. Actually, social scientists have studied centuries of data in a search for the definitive human solution for the insistence of Mammon. And do you know what they found? What we do when we get fed up with all that insistence and all that accumulation? How

we fight back? We hold a garage sale, and we try to convince those who come to our garage sales that they just cannot live without what we could not live without. If you buy that vacuum cleaner, I'll throw in that chair. And as the day draws to a close, and no one has bought anything, then we get anxious, because the stuff is still there. And then mammon has truly won.

Human beings always pride themselves for being at the top of the foodchain, for being without equal in intelligence, creativity, motive, and even hope. Well, in case it had escaped your attention, neither the birds of the air, nor the lilies of the field, have ever held a garage sale. There are so many things we human beings have learned to do so marvelously well, but managing our anxiety is not one of them. A few of us, yes, have been able to find some balance and perspective, to hide ourselves from the insistence of mammon, and the anxiety it provokes, but so many others still struggle with worry, enough worry to at least hold us back from pursuing our dreams, and sometimes so much we become paralyzed. When Jesus gives us his example of the birds and the lilies, and how they live worry-free, I don't know about you, but I feel a little envious, and maybe even foolish. Well, of course they live worry-free, and yes, I probably could too, if I but trusted God a little more. And then I go on to feel a little guilty about my inability to trust God enough, and then I go and buy something, or find some other sort of mammon with which to console myself.

I get the birds and lilies metaphor. I really do. It just doesn't help me very much. That's why I am glad Jesus included just a little bit more, and that lovely quotable part about "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Yes, we human beings need something to do, as much as we need things to have. And blessedly, Jesus has given us something to do, as we try to be. At a practical level, I think he is telling the disciples to do all the things he has already spelled out for them in the Sermon on the Mount, some of which we have looked at this past month, and others that I invite you to go back and take a look at next month. Remember that he says, "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Jesus is all about your righteousness, and how it is a response to the grace you have received, and how it affects other people and the world. It is the content of your discipleship, the evidence of your truly being willing to follow. Are you being salt and light? Are you aiming at God's target instead of your own? Are you taking transforming initiatives when the possibility arises? If you are, Jesus says, if you are, then you really don't need to worry. The rest will take care of itself, because what we should find as we do that is that the things we fear go away little by little. When we seek the kingdom and its righteousness, our neighborhoods become safer. When we seek the kingdom and its righteousness, our rivers become cleaner. When we seek the kingdom and its righteousness, the world is simply a better place, more loving, more caring, more

beautiful, and there is a lot less to really worry about, because we've actually done something to change things. That is the practical dimension of Jesus' words.

Then there is the sneaky dimension. The sneaky Jesus knows that if we are pursuing righteousness in the ways he describes, we won't have time to worry! We'll be so busy being salt and light, that the insistence of mammon won't be able to catch up with us as fast as it used to, that clothes and food will fall in our hierarchy of needs, in favor of the fruits of our righteous labors. A year will go by and we'll wonder what we ever worried about, because everything conveniently took care of itself while we sought the kingdom. Oh, there were some worrisome moments, but they were just that, moments, and they meant less looking toward eternity than tomorrow. Yes, Jesus, better to be distracted by righteousness than by mammon.

And finally, there is the divine dimension. You see, what Jesus is trying to get us to remember by focusing us on the kingdom, is that there is actually a more insistent force in the universe than mammon. It's called God. Yes, believe it or not, God is more powerful than mammon. If it doesn't seem like God is as insistent as mammon, the reason for that may be that God's insistence works on us in a different way, cooperatively instead of coercively, invitationally rather than manipulatively. Oh, yes, God is insistent, but not in the way you might expect. Maybe you've heard how God's insistence works: it is patient; it is kind; it is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not

irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Most of all, it never ends. Yes, God's insistence is called love, and it came to us in the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Christ came to defeat the power of mammon, and to be the one truly insistent force in our lives, calling us to righteousness rather than worry, to hope rather than anxiety. And Christ came to offer us the key to overcoming worry and anxiety, and all the destruction that goes with them, in our own lives, and in the world, and that is to make ourselves ever more open God's insistence on our lives. We run, or should be running, from Mammon's insistence, lest we be overcome by it. But God's insistence is something to let overwhelm us, to saturate us, to fill us, for, as we hear in the letter of First John, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love." Mammon is that master who would punish us, if that be the master we would serve. But God is the master who would perfect us, in the truest sense of that word, to completeness, to wholeness, to fruition in righteousness and love, and to lives freer and freer of worry. The question tonight is not, "How insistent is your God?" Don't worry about that part. God's got it covered. The better question is, "How insistent will you let your God be in casting out your fear?" Jesus said, "Strive first for the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Amen.