

“Quid, Me Anxius Sum?”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau  
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Matthew 6:24-34

July 16, 2017 - Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

We've been hearing parts of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount for the past three weeks. He started by telling us that our understanding of who is blessed is out of sync with the way God sees things. He gave us a different map of blessing to look at, showing God nearest to those who are poor in spirit, or grieving, or meek. He went on to tell us that we are the light of the world and the salt of the earth, and we tried to deny it, but he said it was true, so we agreed to let our light shine and our saltiness show.

And now Jesus has started talking about the things that get in our way as we accept blessings and use our God-given salt and light to bring about the reign of God on earth. What gets in the way? Wealth and worry, it turns out.

And, you know, I was with him on the “blessed be” stuff and the salt and light. I could squint and kind of see what he meant. But “Do not worry?” You must be joking. Jesus, have you met me? Have you met us? Don't you know that we need a new roof? Haven't you heard that our nation is tearing itself apart? Worrying is one of my spiritual gifts, Lord! Sometimes I worry that there are things I don't know that I'm supposed to be worried about. Our world is full of anxiety.

Of course, it always has been. In the spring of 1979, following the meltdown at Three Mile Island, *Mad Magazine* printed its back cover with a nuclear reactor in the background and Alfred E. Neuman in the foreground saying “Yes...me worry!” We've been worrying back to the 60s and 50s and through the War and beyond. People have been worrying for centuries. Clearly, Jesus knew that people in his time were worrying. So worrying is not new.

But I think it's fair to say that worry is now amplified by an interconnected world and the sheer loudness of our communication. And worry has been commodified and monetized in ways never seen before. Our worry sells commercials and products that promise to address worries we didn't know we had: *You should worry about having the right jeans. You should worry about foreigners. You should worry about home invasion. You should worry about how people are perceiving you. You should worry about disease. You should definitely worry about what teenagers are up to these days. You should worry about eggs.* (I'm actually never quite sure about that one.) *You should worry about crime. You should worry about retirement. You should worry about vaccines and GMOs and the amount of bounce in your hair.*

Did you hear the story on NPR just this morning about the new lethal strain of Garbiñe Muguruza that fruit flies are carrying in the Caribbean and that epidemiologists fear will spread to the U.S. by 2019?

No, of course you didn't, because Garbiñe Muguruza is the tennis player who beat Venus Williams to capture the Wimbledon title yesterday. But I bet some of you were getting worried for a second there.

There are lords — political, social, and commercial — who know how to keep their servants worried. Worried people are malleable and obedient and don't rock the boat.

God, it would seem, is not a lord like those. This God — who sees the miserable as blessed and calls us salt and light — is doing things backwards. This God seeks to liberate us from worry. This God does not use fear to lord power over us, instead yearning to take away our worry and free us to enjoy a different kind of lordship.

I picked this text for today weeks before Lil Warren ended up in the hospital last Sunday. I need to tell you, first, that Lil is doing just fine. The first report after worship was that she had fallen in her backyard. It wasn't until I got to her room at Brookwood that afternoon that I got the full story from Lil, as she finished up her lunch.

Lil had been tripped up by a renegade chipmunk and fallen onto her tummy, partially under a bush. This was mid-afternoon on Friday. She couldn't turn herself over or pick herself up. Her always-attentive neighbors were out of town, so Lil waited for someone to pass by out on the sidewalk. But it was a low-traffic Friday, and the sun started to set. With darkness coming, Lil tried to use her purse as a pillow, but it wasn't particularly comfortable. At some point on Saturday, a neighbor pulled into their driveway, ran into the house to grab something, and got back into the car. Lil called, but they simply couldn't hear her. The sun was beating down on her back, until a storm came through in the afternoon. Lil says she was grateful for the cool rain. The sun set, and night came, on Saturday.

Finally, on Sunday morning, her loving neighbors returned and found her and called 911. The EMTs were astounded: hardly a scratch on her, nothing broken, no bleeding, not even any bug bites! In need of nourishment and hydration and rest, Lil was taken to the room where she lay in bed, telling me all of this. I was stunned, and I just kept telling her how grateful I was to be hearing all of this from her while she finished her pudding.

Lil told me that as the hours wore on in the yard, "I thought to myself, 'I'm not going to get upset. That won't help anything. I'm just going to pray for God to protect me.' And here I am!" This past Friday evening, before I asked her permission to tell this story today, I told her about the Gospel lesson and read it to her, with its "do not worry" and "can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" and its "consider the lilies" and "today's trouble is enough for today." And then we prayed.

The word "worry" comes to us from an Old English verb which meant "to strangle, to seize by the throat." Have you felt strangled by worry? Jesus points out that we can't add hours to our lives by worrying, and you'd think a society so focused on productivity would've engineered out worry at some point.

You can say that a dog gnawing on a bone is "worrying it," and isn't that what worry feels like? A slow wearing down, through friction. I worry that we worry incessantly, and that we slowly erode our trust in God, until it gives and snaps, like a bone.

Jesus tells us not to worry about food or drink, or about our bodies, or our clothing. He says that life is more than those things. He points to the birds, who simply live in trust that their needs will be met. He points to the lilies, so extravagantly dressed, and suggests that maybe God can handle our wardrobe needs as well. And at the end, he tell us not to worry about tomorrow, for "tomorrow will bring worries of its own."

And that last piece helps, because Jesus is not denying that there are worrisome things. I don't think he wants us to give up concern, or righteousness, or indignation, or being scandalized by injustice. Quite the contrary. He says "strive first for the kingdom of God." But when was the last time you strove for anything while worrying?

When I ask my iPhone for a "worried" emoji, it gives me a face with its eye closed in despair, an open and frowning mouth, and arched eyebrows. It looks helpless. What does worry look like? It's all wringing hands and slumped shoulders and grinding teeth. It's shaky and nail-biting and twitching and temple rubbing. Worry leaves us in a posture that takes a big burst of energy to unfold from if we need to grab a hand or pour a glass of water for a thirsty stranger or open a door or welcome a child or start digging holes to plop some seeds into. Worry sometimes looks a little bit like prayer, but it sure doesn't look like praise. It's hard to build God's realm with white knuckles.

It's not noticing the things we worry about and concerning ourselves with them that Jesus is objecting to here. It's what we do when we see scary things, or heartbreaking things, or the potential for overwhelming things. Do we call out to God in trust, or lament, or anger, or in a prayer for the strength to change something?

Or do we worry? Do we say, "You are the God of abundance and perfect love and justice — let's get to work!"? Or is it "I see a world of scarcity. I'm fearful. I need to make sure I've got enough."? St. Augustine once said that we are made to love people and use things, and that sin makes us get confused about that. So much of our worry is wrapped up in appealing to one lord while putting our trust in another. God's economy works so differently from the one that lords power over us. We understand that if another child is born into our family, there's not less love to go around. Yet we struggle to trust that there's enough love and hope in the world to accommodate our needy selves.

Yeah yeah yeah, preacher, but we do, in fact, live in a world where some people don't have food or clothing or shelter. Of course, that's not because there isn't enough food or clothing or shelter. Those who go without are not the victims of a society that doesn't worry enough, but of one that doesn't trust in abundance enough to seek the kingdom of God.

I invite you over the next few weeks to look for the sights and sounds that help you put aside worry in favor of kingdom work. Where do you see God at work caring for the world in a way that lowers your blood pressure just a tad? Bring us some pictures, or words, or stories that help you trust that God is providing. Let's stick them up on bulletin boards and windows and websites. Let's show one another what God is doing, and sidle up and grasp a hand being wrung and lead it to go knead some dough or prune a tree or serve a meal.

Days are long and stressful and nights are dark and full of terrors. The people of God respond with trust and full-body prayer and faithful demonstrations of abundance. There is worry for centuries in the air. Peer through the mist in search of the kingdom of God.