

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

September 24, 2017

Sixteenth Sunday
after Pentecost

Matthew 6:24-34

Psalm 139

Do Not Worry About These Things

For several years a woman had been having trouble getting to sleep at night, because she feared burglars. One night her husband heard a noise in the house, so he went downstairs to investigate. When he got there, he did find a burglar. "Good evening," said the man of the house. "I am pleased to see you. Come upstairs and meet my wife. She has been waiting 10 years to meet you." (William Marshall, *Eternity Shut in a Span*)

Worry can be crippling – can't it? In this passage the word "worry" is sometimes translated as "anxiety," which is really just a fancy word for fear. A better translation here is "preoccupied with." Hear these words again with this simple substitution:

Therefore I tell you, do not be preoccupied with your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. And why are you preoccupied with clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, ... So do not be preoccupied with tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring preoccupations of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

I love how straightforward these verses are. Some parts of the Bible are confusing and complicated – but not here. This is not one of those passages, which could be interpreted in several ways – Jesus says it clearly: *Don't worry about the basics of life – Seek first the kingdom – and these things will be added.*

It's important to point out that he isn't saying don't care for these things, or that you should ignore these things. Jesus is not saying that these tangibles – clothing, food and drink – are unimportant. On the contrary, they ARE important and so he provides them for us. It's our preoccupation with them that he warns against. Keep them in perspective. Don't WORRY about them. There's a big difference.

And then he tells us how, verse 33: *But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.* I learned these words in a song: Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness. And all these things will be added unto you...

And so the question is before us: How do we keep all the competing interests in our lives in proper proportion? Knowing what merits our attention and how much of it. What we should prioritize and what we should let go.

I have a friend who makes a habit of starting her day with a prayer. One day, when things were particularly hectic, her four year old son said, "Mommy I don't think you've prayed yet today, because you're acting awfully crazy." And he was right. She had hurried her way into her day without praying first as she normally did.

Seeking God's kingdom FIRST is really a matter of priorities. And while it might sound like a simple saying – well, actually it is quite simple – put God first – still it's not always that easy.

This is not Jesus' *Power of Positive Thinking*. He is not offering a glib platitude. This is not a formula for how to get all the things we want in life. Remember, the last sentence of this passage is: "Today's trouble is enough for today." He knows the daily struggle.

In fact, the entire Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5, 6 and 7) is the blueprint for what life in God's kingdom looks like. That's why in the beginning of chapter 6, when teaching us to pray, Jesus invited us to pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

And remember the context of the Middle East 2,000 years ago - people truly lived day-to-day. Without refrigeration and preservatives, they did gather their food daily; which is why Jesus' prayer was also... "Give us this day our daily bread." (v.11)

So tend to your daily duties - and know that God is providing for you in both big and small ways. Because the kingdom of God is life now, lived in relationship with God and each other as a reflection of His love for us.

And when we are aware of the Kingdom of God all around us, then we will also be driven by a sense of hope rather than worry.

In this way, our faith is not something tacked on to our lives - an hour on Sunday morning at 218 Main St.. It's not a "red telephone" to God, who, like a superhero, will swoop in to save us whenever we get into trouble.

Rather our Christian lives are defined by Christ who orients our lives to God's purpose, God's values and God's priorities. It is giving up our trust in our own resources and opening ourselves to the people God gathers as His church as we commit together to living differently - more generously, more compassionately - than others might.

There are a host of ways to handle our worries... self-help, psychologists, coaches of all sorts have practices and approaches to offer - each with their own angle or emphasis.

And yet even all of these need a center, or a foundation. And I think Psalm 139 is just that. All the layers of worries and anxieties and fears are wrapped around who we are as a beloved child of God for whom Jesus died.

*For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful, I know that full well.*

And not only has God made us, but He searches our hearts and knows them perhaps better than we know ourselves. So there is no where we can go where God is not waiting for us. Wherever our worries take us - whether literally or in our minds - God knows and God goes.

*Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

The story goes that after 30 years of building houses for Ben, a prominent land developer, Sam, announced he wanted to retire, buy some land, and build a small home for himself and his wife.

Sam had hoped for a large bonus for all his years of service. Instead, Ben asked him if he would build one more house. He gave Sam plans for a lovely home located on a choice piece of land with a magnificent view. It was for a very important person, Ben said, and he urged Sam to do his best work.

But, because Sam was resentful, his heart was not in the project and his work was shoddy. He ignored architectural details and even substituted inferior materials so he could pocket the difference. When the house was finished, there was a big celebration. Ben gave Sam an envelope as a parting gift.

"At last, my bonus," Sam thought. But, there was no check in the envelope. Instead, it included a key and a note: "For everything you've done -- the house is yours!"

When we worry we draw inward, we place a veil between ourselves and God, so that we'll probably miss what He is doing. When we are preoccupied with the wrong things we will miss the mark, and the blessings God may have placed right in front of us, and the blessings he has placed within us even!

Sounds simple, and maybe some days it is. But it can also be hard to trust Christ and his promise of a better life with him at the center.

Steve Timm, who did a tour of duty in the Iraq war says this about this passage from Matthew:

Going to war and back is like pressing a reset button on your priorities. I suppose it's like surviving a serious illness. Some things don't seem so important. Who cares if the road has a pothole, as long as it doesn't blow up when you drive over it? Other things are more important – just ask my kids how many hugs they've gotten since I've been home.

Why should it take war or illness to put things in perspective for us? I'd like to believe that it doesn't have to, that we can read these words of Jesus and accept them. I'd like to believe we can get our priorities straight. I'd like to believe we could seek his kingdom first and not get "wrapped around the axle," as soldiers say, about the rest. We should be able to see what's important without needing to be shot at first, shouldn't we?

The only way for us to not worry is to trust that God has indeed provided for all our needs. Sometimes that's hard to see. Still we need to trust God enough to put him first.

Amen.