

Why Worry? Matthew 6:24-34 (Epiph 8a)

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Let's be honest, I know a thing or two about the topic of worrying. As much as I'd like otherwise, I'm simply not a "chill out" type of guy. Never have been—even in elementary school I missed chunks of school due to migraines and corresponding anxieties. Of course, I grew up in a slightly anxious system where family members still need sleeping pills at night, blood pressure meds, cholesterol meds....I find myself worrying about you; about the vitality of this church; about the health of my own ever growing family; about my own sanity when the girls become teenagers; about wider church politic and the list goes on and on. As much as I try, I just can't seem to turn off such concerns like cranking the handle of a faucet.

I say all of this because I know that I may be strange, but I'm not unique: Everyone carries some level of anxiety. Everyone wrestles with varied degrees of fears. Everyone with a live pulse deals with worry. Of course, healthy concern is foundational for life itself. If Gretchen and I didn't worry making sure the twins were well fed, well rested and well protected, how would they even survive? If we didn't worry about the welfare of our elderly parents, who would? If we didn't worry about being good stewards with the gifts and resources we've been given, how would food pantries be stocked, ministries be funded, or non-profits help impact this world. Again, **I cannot stress how foundational healthy concern really is** to our day-to-day lives: It motivates our work ethic; it drives our desire for excellence; it even feeds our very hunger for justice and righteousness in this wider world. Let's face it, if we didn't have concern for others and if we didn't worry about the needs of others than it really means that we don't love others enough to see their lives changed for the better. ***Healthy concern merely points to a beating heart.***

Yet, Jesus also challenges us on the flip side of the equation. Because, it also true that anxiety and concern and fear have the power to truly paralyze our faith and control our lives in really ugly and debilitating ways. I'm not just talking about social anxiety disorders or depression or other related illnesses, which are certainly difficult in themselves. What I think this text is talking about is the more subtle and continuous anxieties of life that can lure our mind and soul away from the intended freedoms and beauties of the gospel. This is more akin to someone who is so afraid of dying that they never really live. Or, someone so fixated on accumulating wealth and financial security that they fail to see what and who that wealth and security are really meant for. Or, someone so worried about tomorrow that they try and overly control today, as if we were ever really in control in the first place.

Key is Matthew's placement of this section on worry with the short but sweet reminder that we cannot serve two masters. The latter is one of the chief battle cries of the OT itself: For instance, this is the beginning of what is called, the "Shama" (Deut 6:4): *Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. **The Lord alone.*** In other words, mammon cannot save us; the contents of Fort Knox cannot save us; the most advanced Star Wars shield cannot save us; not even Steve Jobs and the Apple computer company can save us. *Hear, O Trinity: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.* It isn't that any of those things are necessarily abominations to God, but rather they and all things are always subservient to the one true God who is in ultimate control.

Which also means that if we begin worshiping these other gods, and powers and principalities of this world, we will end up disappointed: Stock Markets crash; political popularity wanes; Madison Avenue manipulates; nations rise and fall. Even wonderful gifts of God within this world like medicine, relationship, community and creativity have their true limitations on this side of everlasting. Now, in the OT, it was often easier to tell when people were worshiping other gods since they would literally set up a shrine or bring animal sacrifices to the fertility gods or the gods of health and wealth and so on. By Jesus' time, like today, these lines have become more blurred and we worship other gods in much more subtle but equally damaging ways. Serving mammon, in even understated ways, tears us away from serving our true master. This, then, suddenly or more gradually over time, also pulls us away from the faithful posture of trusting in the provision of God; trusting that God knows best for us; trusting that even the worst of situations can and will be redeemed in and through Jesus Christ. **This is why unhealthy worry and unharnessed fear really act as insidious viruses slowly but surely destroying that bond of trust between us and our Maker.** Such concern and anxiety can also shape doubt and despair into what is meant to be comfort and peace. Excessive worry and unbalanced fear can even sow denial into our very faith—denial of God's power and passion; denial of God's ability and willingness to love; denial of the final hope of the resurrection.

Admittedly, it wasn't my best parenting move, but we learn, right? I recently told my four-year-old, named Marcie, about those monsters who like to sneak through bedroom windows. For some reason she not only wants the light on at night, but she'll even shut her eyes when looking at the Green Monster as in Fenway Park. Ultimately, she'll need to live in the truth that there are monsters in this world. *So will we.* Sure, we too can try and keep our lights on. We can try and turn away from what we don't want to see. We can try and act like it is all simply a nightmare and we'll wake up soon and all needs, worries, and fears will simply vanish. **We know better.** Life is filled with real monsters; real trials; real temptations; real tragedy; real struggle. **Jesus never promised us different.** Even the use of the lilies and birds speaks to this reality of life before the final restoration—because it is not that these flowers and birds never die. Jesus chose very delicate, very vulnerable, and ultimately, very perishable illustrations. In the mean time, these lilies and birds are indeed given water, wings for flight, sun for photosynthesis, worms for edification and even vivid beauty to share with wider creation. They are fully provided for by the One who breathed life into their being. They are to also fully live within this provision in this time and space of their short lives—be it days, weeks or years. Which means that, we, too, are to blossom and soar within the provisions of our God who not only knew us before we were even in our mother's wombs but who also walks before us into the promises of a radically different future: one where flowers won't wilt; where birds won't perish; where not even monsters can haunt our inner-dreams. **Here O Trinity, the Lord is God, the Lord alone.** Of course, this is the same God who delivered the Israelites out of Egyptian captivity. The same God who provided manna in the wilderness. The same God who stocked promised lands with milk and honey. The same God who brought a people back home from Babylon captivity with renewed and reenergized faith. The same God who fulfilled the central promise of salvation itself by providing us with the liberating hope of Jesus Christ. The same God who through time and space has kept covenant in even the darkest of hours. The same

God who simply wants our fuller devotion—our fuller trust—our fuller willingness to surrender those fears and worries that keep us from getting out of the boat and joining our Savior in living life and experiencing joy to the fullest.

That is why I taped these worries and fears upon the cross. I emailed the congregation earlier in the week asking you to share what you are wrestling with right now in terms of honest fears and worries-- I heard back from about 20 of you. Now, I'm not going to tear these worries up or burn them in some metal pot for effect, because we cannot simply act like difficulty and unknown aren't part of our faith—they are and will be. But I will place them at the foot of the cross—because that is where they belong, at God's feet, and always (literally) under the fuller truth of what Jesus did on that tree nearly 2000 years ago. Because in Christ we know that even the worst of these concerns—the most powerful of these worries—the most grinding of these fears-- cannot yank away God's loving concern for us. **That is our promise and our hope:** That we belong body and soul, in life and in death, to our faithful savior Jesus Christ. That nothing else has ultimately power over us. That no-one else has ultimate control of our life and faith. That no other god or master or principality will die upon a cross for us. That we are God's own and, just like lilies and birds, we've been created to flower and flourish with freedom instead of being captured or controlled by worry.

Listing of the “worries of the congregation”: *public education; daughter's health; well being of adult children; civil unrest in Middle East; future of public education; possible legal responsibility of family member; care giving of parents; cost of child care; mental health; career change; old habits of addiction; health of aging parents; how to accomplish everything; financial instability; daughter and granddaughter; medical bills; great uncle's movement into death; disappointing spouse; pregnant teenager; child's divorce; retirement/future; not doing enough for mother; brother's ability to stay clean and sober; children's faith; future of pensions and social security.*

Let us pray.