



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Undivided Hearts
A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

May 25, 2008
Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)
Matthew 6:24-34

My good friend Patrick Pettit—Pastor Ann’s husband—sent me this story in light of today’s text. It serves as a pretty good introduction to some thoughts about worry.

It seems that this guy’s walking downtown and meets an old friend. He’s never looked better, but walking a few steps behind him is another man who looks just awful.

The guy asks his friend how he’s doing. “Well, I have a mountain of credit card debt; I lost my job; my car is being repossessed, the house is in foreclosure, and my wife left with her Pilates trainer.”

“So how come you look so good?”

“It’s so easy, you won’t believe it—I hired Morris here. He’s a professional worrier! I just give him a list of all the things bothering me and he worries about them for me. I sleep great; I can focus on my job hunt; and I haven’t thought about my wife in 2 weeks!”

“That’s sounds great! How much does Morris charge?”

“\$67,000 a year.”

“\$67,000 a year? How are you going to pay for that?”

“What do I care? That’s his worry.”

Would that it were that easy.

I was talking to the mother of one of Rachel’s friends during a birthday party at Pump It Up a couple of Saturdays ago. As Trina and I stood there watching the energetic kids run and play and slide, she began to tell me about a cruise she had taken with her family not too many months before. And, while she obviously enjoyed the cruise, the one thing that stuck out in her mind was their family’s adventure when they stopped in one of the Jamaican ports.

As a part of their pre-cruise planning, they had purchased a snorkeling excursion, which meant that they would climb into one of those little boats that take you to the “perfect snorkeling spot” a few waves away. As Trina tells it, a storm was blowing in and there were six-foot swells that convinced them that it was probably not the best day to make such a trip. The guides, however, wouldn’t hear of that. “You already paid for this,” they told them, “so you’re going.”

So Trina and her family—including her just a few months old new baby—climbed into the boat and were instantly rocked by the swells. She thought for sure that one of those waves was going to swamp the boat or wash one of her loved ones off the deck. You could almost see Trina’s horror as she described that memory. What really got to her, though, was the music that kept blaring on the little boat’s sound system. It was the traditional Reggae music with yet another variation of their common theme—“Don’t worry about a thing. Don’t worry; be happy.”

Looking back, Trina recognizes the absurdity of the moment and the music. While the tune was mind-numbingly being fixed into their memories, the words seemed comparatively weak against the power of the six-foot swells they were speeding through. Don't worry? Are you kidding?

As I worked on this sermon, I remembered how one of my professors in seminary used to tell us that a good question to ask of a passage of scripture is this: What music do you hear playing in the background of this passage? It was a technique to help us move beyond the written words on the page to the emotions underneath in the hopes that we would really hear all that the passage wanted us to hear.

As I studied this text from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, I couldn't help but hear the steel drums as backdrop to the song etched in Trina's memory: "Don't worry; everything's going to be alright. Don't worry; be happy." (One of the unfortunate side-effects of this technique, of course, is that I also now hear Jesus speaking in a Jamaican accent as he instructs his disciples not to worry about their lives.)

You know it as well as I do—we are living through days that make us feel as if we're speeding across rough waves, and everywhere we look there are six-foot swells threatening to swamp our very existence. We pull up to the pump and feel our hearts sink because gas went up another 20 cents since the day before.

We listen to another set of talking heads on the cable news telling us the latest political wrangling of one or both parties and we wonder if anyone is telling us the truth any more.

We hear the devastating news of storms in places we recognize—like Oklahoma or Kansas or Georgia—and read of catastrophic events in China and Myanmar and wonder what we can do to respond in any significant way.

We huddle in fear as our little boat makes its way across uncertain seas, and everywhere we look, we see another swell threatening to overwhelm us. It makes the words of a poem by Leonard Cohen seem devastatingly insightful. He writes, "The blizzard of the world has crossed the threshold and it has overturned the order of the soul" (as quoted by Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, 1). Anyone even half awake knows that there is a sea of worry threatening to sweep us away.

So what does Jesus say to us—his disciples—in the midst of such worry? Before we answer that, let's step back just a bit. Remember, this passage is right in the middle of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. He's talking to his disciples, and the crowds are also listening in behind them. The whole sermon is a collection of teachings on different things that Jesus wants his disciples to know. It's really about what a disciple's life lived under the reign of God looks like. In other words, Jesus is exploring what a faithful disciple looks like—how they think and act, what priorities they set, and what loves control them. And, as he often does, Jesus doesn't simply prescribe rules and customs to be strictly adhered to, but rather he prods the imaginations of his hearers by asking questions about life without giving direct answers or by holding up scenarios or choices for his hearers to consider. Jesus is always—especially in his Sermon on the Mount—trying to get his hearers to stop and consider the choices before them, and in doing so, to shape their lives according to the ways of the kingdom.

In this middle section of his sermon, then, Jesus is urging his disciples to seek the kingdom of heaven above any other distractions. At the outset, he is warning us about the foolishness of trying to battle insecurity by stockpiling wealth. It's always at risk, as every one of your senses can tell you during these difficult economic days. But the reality is that even when we return to a booming economy, even all the wealth in the world won't secure what we really desire, which is a treasure worthy of our hearts.

Dig below our anxieties—even just a little bit—and what we unearth is our heart's real desire, which is “to count—to count for something and to count to someone. To come to the end of a day—or the end of a life—with the satisfaction of having stood for what is good, with the joy of having been loved and having loved well in return, with the memory of having shown mercy, and with the peace of having walked with God—these are the true treasures, the treasures of the kingdom, a fortune no thief can steal” (Long, *Matthew*, 74).

But, as one of my former teachers points out, “the decision whether to store up treasures on earth or treasures in heaven is not one of mere financial planning; it is one of basic orientation....If a person sees life as a gift from God, a bountiful outpouring of God's providence, then that person is free to hold possessions with a light grasp and to be generous toward others. On the other hand, if life is seen as a competitive struggle between winners and losers over limited resources, then one is a slave to this struggle, and the only viable creed is ‘Where's mine?’” (Long, 74).

This, of course, is why Jesus reminds us in the opening verse of today's text that God and wealth are two demanding—and competing—masters. If a slave had two masters, what was to be done if these masters gave competing commands? You would have to choose between them, giving one loyalty and turning away from the other master in doing so.

And, though we try to convince ourselves differently, Jesus wants us to remember the truth: God and wealth have very different tasks in mind for their slaves. There are two masters, but only one servant. Living *the* good life and living *a* good life pull in opposite directions. One cannot serve God and wealth.

Now we're getting back to our question from a few minutes ago: So what does Jesus say to us—his disciples—in the midst of our worry today? Ultimately, whether we serve God or wealth depends upon trust. But first, here's what Jesus said: “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. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.”

At first, these “words about the birds and the lilies—lovely as they are—are not very compelling. (They sound a lot like the music Trina heard on the waves.) Sure, birds and lilies don’t worry about life, but they also don’t have mortgages, car payments, grocery bills, and college tuitions to keep them awake at night. All of us would like to be relieved of worry and anxiety, but Jesus appears to be suggesting an unrealistic strategy—‘look at the birds, look at the lilies’—to which one is tempted to reply, ‘Yes, but look at the bills!’” (Long 75). And look at all the other things that threaten to swamp our lives!

So what is Jesus really suggesting when he tells us to look at the birds and the lilies? He’s reminding us that when compared to human beings made in God’s image, the birds are insignificant creatures and lilies are just like grass. And, the question hangs in the air, if God cares so faithfully and lavishly for inconsequential creatures, can you even imagine how much God cares for and will provide for human beings?

By inviting us to consider such a world of lavish care, Jesus is inviting our imaginations to enter that world and compare it to the world in which we must live out our lives. The mortgage is still due and we still have to pay for the tank-full of gas, but we have seen this other world, this world of God’s gracious and tender care, and it promises to overthrow the power of anxiety. We will still wonder if we can make the checkbook balance at the end of the month, but there is nothing in this world that can take away what God provides—dignity, a sense of worth, the confidence of being treasured in the heart of God.

This section of Jesus’ sermon ends in a peculiar way. This section on wealth closes with a word about worry: “So do not worry about tomorrow.” The hunger to acquire wealth, the temptation to serve possessions as our master rather than the living God, grows out of greed, but at its profoundest level it has to do with anxiety about the security of the self, of our heart. St. Augustine once prayed that “our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee,” and restless anxiety over what tomorrow may hold is a sign that our hearts have not found their true home. So when Jesus invites us not to worry, he is doing nothing less than reminding us that there is nothing looming in the future that can destroy our basic worth as a human being and that there is nothing more powerful than God’s care.

In these tenuous and uncertain times, may we learn to rest in the God who is our hearts’ true home. And may that God grant us comfort and hope for the living of these days.