

WHAT – ME WORRY?
(Matthew 6:24-34)

Matthew may be the official text for today, but my real inspiration is that great American philosopher Alfred E. Neuman, mascot and cover boy for *Mad Magazine*, whose motto was “What – me worry?” It’s been a lot of years since I read *Mad*, but that phrase has stuck with me. And not just me. It’s become part of American pop culture.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not claiming that Alfred E. Neuman is on a par with Jesus. But what we just heard Jesus say does sound a bit like Alfred E. Neuman. “Your life – no big deal.” “What you’re going to eat or drink – nothing to worry about.” “What you have to wear – don’t give it a second thought.”

That had to have sounded strange to peasants in first century Palestine because they struggled just to make it from one day to the next. Consider, what’s the first petition in the Lord’s Prayer? “Give us this day our daily bread.” There’s a very good reason that comes first: because daily bread was a concern for most of the population. Jesus just got through teaching them to pray for bread a few verses earlier. Now here he is saying “Don’t worry about what you’re going to eat.” I wonder if anyone who heard him was wondering, well, which it is: “Are we supposed to pray for bread or not even think about it?”

If Jesus’ teaching sounded strange in the 1st century, it doesn’t sound any less strange in the 21st. Today it’s not just peasants who have worries; it’s everyone. Can any of us honestly say there isn’t something we don’t worry about? Maybe it’s your job. Maybe it’s your retirement income. Maybe it’s a child. Maybe it’s an elderly parent. Maybe it’s your health. Anxiety is simply a fact of life.

So maybe Jesus’ teaching doesn’t just sound strange. With so much anxiety going around, it sounds downright unrealistic. If only it were as simple as he makes it sound. But we can’t just wish away anxiety. There’s no magic pill to cure worry. If there were, psychiatrists would be out of business.

The Greek word that’s translated “worry” means something like “split attention” or “divided concern.” And what it really comes down to is balance. Of course, everyone needs all those things that Jesus says we’re not to worry about. We all need food, we all need clothing. Suggesting otherwise would be downright ridiculous. The problem comes when we worry so much about those necessities that our priorities get out of whack and we give as much attention to the stuff of life as we give to God.

When that happens, we start looking at the world in terms of scarcity. We worry because we don’t trust there’s enough to go around and that we’ll end up with the short end of the stick. And when we look at the world that way, we start to worry about this or that, and then a general sense of anxiety sets in, and pretty soon we’re operating out of fear. And we don’t need to be reminded that we’re never at our best when we act out of fear.

Some of you know that Nancy and I came home with a dog two weeks ago. How and why is a long story for another time. But this little guy has had four or five homes in his short life, and needless to say, bouncing around like that has made him a bit anxious. So he doesn't always behave the way he should or the way we would like him to – and I have a scar to prove it. The challenge for us is to give him some security and some stability to bring down his anxiety level and get rid of some of his bad behavior. In the past two weeks we've become big fans of the Dog Whisperer.

When Muggles is feeling anxious or fearful, he growls and nips. Most of us find more socially acceptable outlets for our anxiety. We look for security in things and we accumulate more and more. Or we become obsessed by intangibles like popularity or beauty or the host of things that don't actually do anything for us but make us feel better about ourselves for the moment. Waylon Jennings wrote a song about "lookin' for love in all the wrong places. We could paraphrase it and say that all too often we're "lookin' for security in all the wrong places." And all our "lookin'" only heightens our anxiety because we will never have enough, never be beautiful enough, never be popular enough. We always think we need that little something more.

The question we need to ask ourselves is "enough for whom?" Jesus tells us that God provides for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, and that since God provides for them, God will surely provide for us. Jesus wants to redirect our vision and our lives, to turn us away from the worry that comes from always seeing the glass half empty, to redirect us to trust in a God of abundance who doesn't value us by what we have but by who we are – beloved children.

We can easily worry so much about what may happen tomorrow or next week that we miss out on God's life-giving activity today. We become fretful that we might lose something if we shift our gaze away from what we have to the new thing God is calling us to. Jesus puts our fear down to a lack of faith – "you of little faith" he calls those who worry too much. He wants us to have both – new life in God and new appreciation for the gifts we do have.

If we jump ahead in the gospel of Matthew, we find another time when Jesus talks about food and water and clothing. Only this time he's not talking about our needs and our worries; he's talking about our sharing. He's talking about the last judgment and he says our place in the judgment depends on how willing we are to share the very things that we worry so much about. "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,...I was naked and you gave me clothing" (Mt. 25:35). That's what Jesus says to the righteous. The unrighteous do none of those things, they hang on to what they have, and they get judged accordingly.

We can't do what Jesus and God expect of us – demand of us – unless we believe that we have enough, unless we set aside our fear-fueled anxiety for a faith that God will indeed provide, unless we learn to trust that our God is a God of abundance and not scarcity. A faith like that sets us free to bring life to others.

Jesus was not a Pollyanna. To quote another song, he never promised us a rose garden. He never said that being a disciple would guarantee us a trouble-

free life. When he says “don’t worry,” we shouldn’t hear that as a promise of prosperity. Just the opposite. The last verse we heard this morning warns us to expect trouble. But don’t get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow because we’ve got enough to deal with today.

None of us came here on a morning like this to hear a sermon about materialism and greed. We came to worship God. But don’t you see, that’s exactly what Jesus is trying to help us do? We can’t fully worship the living God, the God we see in Jesus, while there are other gods clamoring for our attention and consuming us with anxiety and worry. We can slip into bad habits for good reasons, but Jesus calls us back to our center so our worry doesn’t overwhelm us.

It is precisely because each day does bring troubles that we need to hear the good news that Jesus offers today and every day. Worry tends to be all consuming. All the “what ifs” take us out of the godly now, where we can know joy and gratitude if we trust the Creator of all, who is also the God of each moment. Treasure this day, this moment. Let our hearts be filled with wonder till there’s no room for worry. Let faith free us from fear. Trust that the God who holds tomorrow and all eternity also holds today.